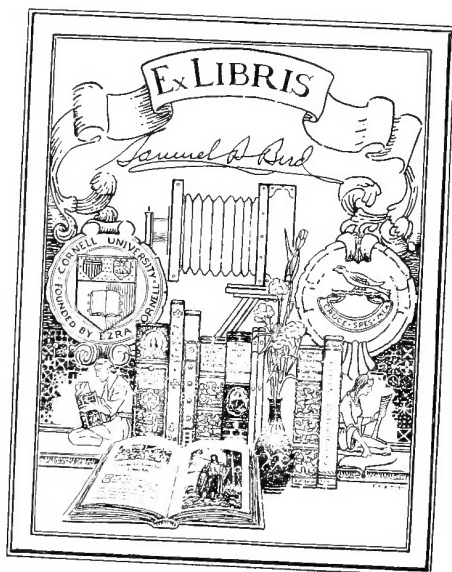




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No. 32

*THE SECRET MEMOIRS OF THE
DUC DE ROQUELAURE WRITTEN
BY HIMSELF NOW FOR THE FIRST
TIME COMPLETELY TRANSLATED
INTO ENGLISH IN FOUR VOLUMES
VOLUME FOUR*

PRIVATELY PRINTED

MDCCCXCVII

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CHAPTER XLVI

Louis XIV.'s inclination to gallantry—His first amour—His illness—He is in danger of death—His recovery—The journey to Lyons—The Court of Savoy and the Court of France—Plan of a marriage between the Princess of Savoy and Louis XIV.—What the King thought of his future spouse—The incident which led to the breaking-off of the match—News from Spain—Singular arrangement made between Cardinal Mazarin and the Dowager Queen in case the King should not marry the Infanta—The Court leaves Lyons—A journey to Saint-Jean-de-Luz—Conferences at the Ile des Faisans—Louis XIV.'s marriage to the Infanta—The trains—Departure of the Court—A night passed at Saint-Justin, in Armagnac—A noise at night—The surgeon—Mademoiselle de Montpensier in her night-dress—Her confusion at being seen in this state—Her Royal Highness begs me to shut my eyes—The means I employed to come to the rescue of her modesty—Singular consequences of an earthquake.

At an early age Louis XIV. had shown clearly his strong inclination to the pleasures of love. No sooner had the coronation at Rheims conferred absolute power upon him than his heart sought

enslavement. His earliest homage was rendered to Mademoiselle de Mancini, who later married Prince Eugene of Savoy, otherwise Comte de Soissons. The next passion which he displayed was for Mademoiselle de La Motte-Houdancourt, who had taken Mademoiselle La Porte's place among the queen's maids-in-waiting. His connection with her was much discussed at the court, where all the talk was of the gallantries and attentions of the king towards this young beauty.

After these various incidents, and at the close of the assault on Dunkirk and the affair of the Dunes, the king returned from the camp dangerously ill. This caused general consternation. The host was exhibited in all the churches, and public prayers were ordered to be said for the recovery of his Majesty. During five or six days the anxiety was acute. Treatment had yielded no result, and every moment bad news was expected. It must further be remembered that had such a disaster occurred Monsieur would have been called to the throne, and in sober earnest he had not capacity to govern. He was too frivolous, too much of a child, and the fine qualities which had already become apparent in the king would have accentuated the blemishes which I have just mentioned as certainly attaching to Monsieur.

But at last, thanks to the intervention of Providence, his Majesty's condition improved materially;

the bulletins became more and more hopeful, and before long it was made known that all danger was at an end.

Then it was mooted that Louis XIV. should be married to Princess Marguerite of Savoy. The queen dowager, her mother, brought her to Lyons, where the king met her and found her much to his liking. A large number of important people took part in this journey to Lyons, which was undertaken about the feast of All Saints. As the queen mother and Cardinal Mazarin accompanied the king, it may be imagined how great magnificence was displayed on the occasion.

Anne of Austria was not very much in favour of this marriage. But her desire to please the king, her son, made her willing to welcome the result, whatever it might be. For her own part, she would have preferred the English princess, but the king would not hear of it. Immediately after the first meeting, the king, who was on horseback, galloped back to his mother, who asked him what he thought of the Savoyard princess.

"She is charming," replied Louis XIV., with an animated expression. "But it seemed to me that she is even smaller than Madame de Villeroi."

"And have you noticed nothing else?" persisted the Queen.

"Oh! yes, mother, yes. She is very well made, and her complexion—ah, well, her complexion . . ."

“ Well, what of that ? ”

“ Well, it is somewhat dark. But that does not suit her badly . . . on the contrary.”

The king added a few further details to this rapid sketch, and some moments later the queen dowager's carriage came up. Then those who composed the court on either side alighted, and all the women could see the Princess Marguerite, and there were many in whom she failed to inspire the same opinion, and that by a great deal, which she had evoked in the king. I happened to hear Mademoiselle de Montpensier express her estimation of the princess in terms which were far from flattering, though in some respects she did her full justice. However, the sketch she gave of her showed that she had looked upon her with prejudiced eyes. It is true that women's eyes when they are judging one another ought to be under suspicion.

Nothing more sudden can be imagined than the breaking-off of the plan of marriage between the King and Princess Marguerite.

Everything was passing as the court of Savoy would have desired, when, on a sudden, the Cardinal, finding himself alone with Anne of Austria, came up to her and said :

“ Madame, we came hither to marry your son. How say you to going back without doing it ? ”

“ Why, I should be more surprised than grieved at the change,” replied the Queen. “ Has anything happened ? ”

"That thing has happened, madame," replied Mazarin, "which your Majesty would be least likely to expect, and the only thing in the world you could not hope for."

Anne of Austria reflected for a moment, and then said in a tone which clearly showed she fancied herself mistaken :

"Do you mean by chance that my brother the King of Spain has sent to offer me the Infanta for the king my son?"

"That is so," said the Cardinal. "Pimentel brought me the news not an hour ago."

From that moment there was a marked coldness in the relations between the two courts of France and Savoy. There began to be talk about leaving, and all that related to the great marriage scheme was left on one side. The queen dowager perceived it, and nothing would do but she must have explanations. Whatever feeling she may have had of her own importance, this royal lady had the good sense to see that the interests of France and the faith must take precedence of her own interests, and that it would be no dishonour for her daughter to be displaced by a personage of the rank and greatness of the Infanta of Spain. At last this much was agreed upon, that if the fresh negotiations which were now to be set afoot should fall through, the king's hand should be reserved to the Princess Marguerite.

All having been thus arranged, the court left

Lyons after a sojourn of a few weeks. The journey had been made at a very bad time of year, for we did not return till the month of January.

The king's amour with Mademoiselle de Mancini kept all tongues and wits busy for some time.

We shall omit the greater part of the details of this passage in the life of Louis XIV. to come at once to those events which made their mark in history.

Mazarin dealt promptly with the King of Spain's proposals; it was a question of concluding peace and giving France a queen. The journey to Saint-Jean-de-Luz was determined on, and I was lucky enough to be appointed a member of the king's suite.

A long halt was made at Bordeaux. We visited the town and its monasteries; in the evening we joined the queen's entertainment, and the king paraded the regiment of guards. During this time the Cardinal was already at Saint-Jean-de-Luz, where he was settling the bases of a treaty of peace and alliance with the Spanish minister, Don Luis de Haro.

Thenceforward the business was very actively pursued. A great number of people, and among them the Princess de Carignan and her daughter, Madame de Bade, came to the court to be present at the ceremony which was in preparation.

All the talk was of the characters of the young king and the Infanta. All those who had seen the latter at San Sebastian gave fine accounts of her,

and all were at one in extolling her grace and distinction. Was it mortification which at this time induced the Princess Marguerite to contract another marriage? I know not. But what struck everybody at the time was the extreme promptitude with which her "second-best marriage," as it was called at some of the European courts, was concluded. The husband who appeared as successor to the grandson of Saint Louis was the Duke of Parma, a prince of small consideration, ruling over some thousands of Italians, a man of no worth whatever, whose one merit, as they said, was that he had some skill as a *blacksmith*. It was certainly said that he could shoe horses passably well.

While the court of Spain was at Saint Sebastian the French court arrived at Saint-Jean-de-Luz. The conferences about the marriage took place at a spot between those two towns, to wit, upon the Isle of Pheasants. The meeting-room was richly decorated. Access to it was given by a bridge fitted up as a gallery, and there were two doors, one on the French side, the other on the Spanish. I inspected all the details with M. le Tellier and the Marshal de Villeroy, who had been included in the suite as a matter of course, and who had preparatory interviews with Don Luis de Haro, the Spanish minister, every day.

The life we led at Saint-Jean-de-Luz pending the final arrangements for the royal marriage was very

agreeable and diversified. A play was given every night, and as Anne of Austria attended it regularly, we went to it with her; the actors were Spaniards, and played a kind of religious mysteries, wherein the names of the Virgin and Jesus Christ were sometimes so freely handled that several people expressed their surprise at it. Cardinal Mazarin, who was suffering from an access of gout at the time, considered it best to forego these very secular entertainments, and the plays were abandoned almost immediately.

When the great day was fixed, the king showed much concern about the present which he intended to send to the Infanta. Certain experts in these matters had been given charge of it, and one night we were all summoned after supper to the Cardinal's to receive and examine in detail the famous wedding-present. It was a splendid box of scented aloes-wood, filled full of all that can astonish and delight the eyes. I have never in my life seen so great a quantity of diamonds, pearls, cut crystals, rings and miniatures all covered with jewels and gold.

On the following day we set out for Fontarabia, where the ceremony was to take place.

I shall pass over the details of the marriage, which was by proxy, in brief, for the formalities were such as would be expected, and such as they will always be, and the reader would take a very slender interest in the recital of them.

Although Louis XIV. was not present in person,

mass was said with solemnity. The king's act of proxy and the papal dispensations were read aloud, after which the union was consecrated. But the real ceremony was not celebrated till some days afterwards. As the princesses were to wear dresses with trains on the occasion, I offered to carry that of Mademoiselle de Montpensier. I had the great honour of being accepted by her Royal Highness. Unfortunately, certain discussions upon etiquette arose between the ladies of the court and Cardinal Mazarin, and the first plans were changed; so I had to acquiesce in the subsequent arrangement, which was determined by the king with the very laudable object of provoking no jealousy.

The alliance between the two kingdoms was thus confirmed by a marriage and a treaty of peace, and we then left Saint-Jean-de-Luz, eager to see Paris and Versailles once more.

On the way a singular adventure befell Mademoiselle de Montpensier, who did not follow the king's line of route exactly. One night she slept at Saint-Justin, in Armagnac, where she found no lodging but in a vile hovel all exposed to the weather, with windows that would hardly shut and rooms separated by partitions so thin that we could easily converse from one room to another. I had joined her Royal Highness's suite, and she did me the honour to laugh with me over this matter, asking me several times to answer in a conversation by means of broken sticks,

which she had begun with the Princess de Caignan.

I chose my lodging in a building adjoining this house, and, to judge by appearances, the place of my choice was no better than the other. However, I made the best of it, and was glad to stretch myself in the bed they had prepared for me, not that the bed was good, but that I was overcome with fatigue.

On her side, mademoiselle did the like, and said good-night to her tiring-women about ten o'clock.

The first half of the night passed as tranquilly as might be, but about four o'clock in the morning I was awakened by a resounding noise.

Plucked from the pleasant repose of my deep sleep, I jumped out of bed, rubbed my eyes, rushed to the window and opened it, whereupon I recognised the voice of mademoiselle's surgeon, who was shouting :

"Help! help! Come down, mademoiselle . . . the house is falling! Save yourself!"

My first thought was that the surgeon might very well be right, for the building had not a solid look, and was more like a theatre-scene than a real house. However, when I struck down with my foot, I found . that the part where I was still standing had not yet collapsed into the cellar.

I threw on some clothes hastily and went down into the courtyard.

This occurred in the summer of 1660, so it will be understood that the sky, at four o'clock in the morn-

ing, was bright enough to make everything distinct in my memory. So I have the most perfect recollection of the scene which was then presented to my sight.

A woman rushed from the house, and took her stand on the margin of a well which adjoined the wall.

She was a tall woman, shapely and well-developed. Her skin was of a brilliant whiteness, so that it resembled satin; her hair was of a soft fair colour, and fell around her so thickly that for a moment it hid her face from my gaze. But upon a movement that she made, involuntarily no doubt, I recognised . . .

Shall I dare to say it? Emotion and respect combine to check my pen.

But why, indeed, should I refrain?

She was a creature at once so fair and so pure that no base thought could attach itself to her name. . . .

It was Mademoiselle de Montpensier!

Yes, Mademoiselle herself, in her nightdress, almost nude, her arms bare, her shoulders exposed to the roughness of the wind.

Must I avow it? The courtier, slave of etiquette, gave place in me to the man, admirer of loveliness. I contemplated and I admired the magnificent union of feminine perfections, which were heightened in this princess by the unmistakable *cachet* of royal birth.

Already I knew the pretty shape of the face, the aquiline nose, the lips ruddy as coral, the comely mouth, the blue eyes, and that charming air

of pride which lent her whole demeanour a dignity that a queen might have envied.

So it was not upon these various excellences that my eagerly prying glances were directed.

An exquisitely formed leg, a little foot, a bust whose two spheres held their shape as firmly as if they had been imprisoned in a brocaded bodice, such were the wonders that chiefly engaged my attention.

In the meanwhile, I heard the surgeon's voice again. But this time he was talking to Mesdames de Carignan and d'Uzès.

"Do not come down, mesdames, the floor has given way. Do not move, I beg you."

"But . . . her Royal Highness . . . what has become of her?" asked Madame d'Uzès.

"Mademoiselle de Montpensier is safe," replied the surgeon.

At that moment mademoiselle perceived me. Then, with a cry that I shall remember all my life, for both laughter and tears were commingled in it, she exclaimed:

"Oh, Monsieur de Roquelaure, what are you doing there?"

"I thought your Royal Highness was in danger, and I came. Have I done wrong, mademoiselle?"

"No . . . but at least do not look at me. In Heaven's name, shut your eyes!"

And while she spoke thus she sought to hide her breast with her hands. At that moment I perceived

a muleteer, who was grooming his beasts in a stable that looked upon the courtyard. I ran to him, and without more ado, seized a rug that was meant to cover one of his mules, and brought it to the princess, saying :

“I will try to forget what I have seen, Mademoiselle, that I vow. Now pardon me, and take this.”

She thanked me, and begged me to go back to my room, and I obeyed.

I am bound to reproach myself with not having followed mademoiselle's orders to the letter ; for it was not in me, when I cast the rug about her, to turn my head away or shut my eyes. So I can boast that I have distinctly seen, in their seductive nudity, those secret charms whereof the full and entire enjoyment was, as is well known, accorded some years later to the brave and elegant Duc de Lauzun.

When the turmoil was over, we found that the surgeon's alarm was only too well grounded. There had been a slight shock of earthquake, which is very common in those regions, and a small portion of the wall had in fact collapsed. If the shock had been stronger it would probably have been fatal to us all.

Afterwards, whenever the journey to Spain was mentioned before Mademoiselle de Montpensier and me, she could not help blushing, and I could not help looking in some other direction.

CHAPTER XLVII

A serious ceremony—The contracting parties—Their portraits—Presumed astonishment of the reader when he sees their names—And yet it is true!—A maid—Six hundred pistoles and final notice—The Comtesse du Lude with Madame de Lesdiguières—The little dark room—Information given—Noble behaviour of the Duchesse de Lesdiguières—I fall at her feet—Two tears over a memory—Certainly I was not made for marriage—The Duchesse de Roquelaure is delivered of a child—Her sufferings—Her death—My regret—I retire to a monastery.

IN the midst of all these occurrences, on a day of the year that I will not name too plainly, there happened one of those strange things which set every tongue wagging and excite equal surprise and curiosity.

And yet the occurrence was but a marriage.

The marriage took place, as all fashionable marriages take place, in a well-decorated church, ornamented with armorial bearings, at the high altar, and in the presence of a crowd of people with the respectful demeanour that such a circumstance calls for. If here and there were persons inclined to laugh, no one let it appear, and mass was heard and followed with every semblance of true pious attention.

The officiating priest had a deeply solemn air, which would not have been out of place if he had spoken over a coffin, and if the choir had been singing the *De Profundis* they could not have put more unction and gravity into their performance.

The bride was one of the most accomplished beauties of the court of France. Her comely and regular lineaments were remarkable for a striking expression of kindness and wit. Her bust was of an indescribable perfection. Her arms were like flawless marble, and her waist was such as to afflict all her friends or rivals—the words mean the same in such cases—with jealousy.

The bridegroom was not exactly an Apollo. His eyes were not too killing ; his nose, though it had led him straight in the world, was not of a perfect structure ; his mouth had no other merit than that of letting off some droll sayings now and then ; and certain evil persons would have it that his pointed chin was like that of a hunchback. In spite of these little imperfections, he was a presentable fellow, and not even the most illustrious family in France would have had reason to complain of him or blush for him.

If anyone wishes to know the name of this mysterious pair, I am ready to reveal it.

The lady was the daughter of Madame la Comtesse du Lude.

The gentleman in question was no other than myself.

Roquelaure! Roquelaure! you will say. Roquelaure surrenders his freedom! Roquelaure buries himself! Roquelaure married!

I expected these interjections, and these questions, and this outcry, and this is my reply :

“ Yes, *mes amis*, yes! Roquelaure takes the risk. . . . He will face the danger that he knows so well! He challenges perils which, if Heaven is just, should threaten him more than any man; for he is not himself, he is not within his own control; he can no longer call his life his own, he is enamoured, insensate, jealous! He is in love! . . . But this time he is seriously in love.”

Will it last long? God knows.

The fact is that I married Mademoiselle du Lude after winning my way by all the means and stratagems and tricks of tactics that I had hitherto left to others, and at which I had even been so rash as to laugh sometimes.

Among others, I had taken a certain Gertrude, a servant of the mother's, into my interests, a woman who was well fitted for intrigues, being at once curious, indiscreet and a gossip, and yet very reserved upon occasions of importance, of very quick perception, and very punctual in executing those commissions with which she was intrusted, especially when she was liberally paid.

She did me more service than I can tell in getting rid of rivals, circumventing the mother, and

cleverly conveying information to me of the daughter's inclinations, and in keeping me abreast of all that was done or said in the house with an incredible regularity.

I hesitated as to what I was to do for her when once the *conjungo* had been spoken. Gertrude was a woman who could make herself very useful, and I might have need of her services; but, on the other hand, these mighty anteroom talents are dangerous from many points of view. So long as they are faithful to us, all is well; but once there is treason, farewell to domestic happiness. This latter consideration carried the day. I feared that Gertrude, after being in my pay, might pass into my wife's, and thus make me repent of the confidence I had reposed in her. I thought about getting rid of her. She was a brunette, with an attractive figure and a keen eye, and I knew that she had a certain inclination to enter the marriage state. I gave her six hundred pistoles by way of dowry, and bade her make provision for herself elsewhere.

Then I set out for the country, and the honeymoon commenced.

The reader, seeing how grave a matter it was, will allow me to draw a veil over the secrets of the bridal chamber.

Seeing that, of all the jokes in the world, marriage is the least diverting, no one will grumble at my discretion.

This marriage, as will soon appear, had sad consequences, such as I care not to dwell on.

But before the contract was signed, an original little scene occurred.

The mother, the Comtesse du Lude, would not conclude the matter till she had full information, and desired to make quite sure that she was bestowing her daughter upon a good husband.

She sought such information about me as could not possibly be doubted. They told her that M. de Mazarin knew me well, that Mademoiselle de Montpensier had a particular regard for me, and that the king himself, if she wished to consult him about me, would no doubt deign to approve my suit and encourage my pretensions.

"No, no," said the Countess. "These great people have their mouths full of recommendations, and, out of kindness, they would give the devil a passport to paradise. I would sooner see someone who has a long acquaintance with M. de Roquelaure, and who knows his character thoroughly. I prefer that it should be a woman. Only women can give a sound judgment upon a man's mind and heart. I know one woman who, in this respect, is admirably situated. I will go and see her to-morrow."

That night I learned that the woman whom the Comtesse du Lude thought of asking for information about me was the Duchesse de Lesdiguières.

I thought myself lost.

To say what reflections crossed my mind during the night would be very difficult, if not impossible. I saw my happiness imperilled and my marriage broken off. Whatever might be Madame de Lesdiguières' disposition towards me, I could but fear that an involuntary indiscretion, some phrase prompted by bitterness, might spoil all. . . . How was I to extricate myself?

I have always loved to take a short way with difficulties.

Punctually at twelve I was with Madame de Lesdiguières.

She received me most affectionately, and her first word was a reproach that I had so long deferred coming to see her. This was of a good augury, and I was already preparing to take advantage of it when Madame la Comtesse du Lude was announced.

On hearing her name I changed colour. Madame de Lesdiguières questioned me, and I stammered. . . . At length I made her understand that I had grave reasons for not meeting the old countess, and, just as in the prime days of our amour, when the duke came in at an inconvenient time, I was hidden in a little room adjoining, which was very small and as dark as an oven.

Madame du Lude came up. I heard the two ladies kiss each other. They spoke of the rain and the fine weather, of the queen's amusements, and of the news from Spain; then of the Academy and

the *soirées* given in the Marais. So far no harm was done ; but soon the countess coughed thrice running, and I knew she was about to begin upon some scandalous matter. And, in fact, she made a direct attack on the question, and the duchess, who knew not yet what husband was being talked of, cried :

“ Ah ! were I a man, no one else should marry Mademoiselle du Lude. I have never seen a more perfect beauty. You have, no doubt, been very careful in your choice, comtesse.”

“ It is upon that very point that I have taken the liberty of coming to consult you,” said the Countess, “ for you know the man whom . . . ”

“ And his name is ? ”

“ The Duc de Roquelaure.”

At the name a short, metallic little exclamation, which I cannot convey by any human syllable, escaped the Duchesse de Desdiguères.

“ Eh ? ” said Madame du Lude.

“ What ? ”

“ I thought you were coughing.”

“ Very likely ; it is so easy to catch cold in this bad weather.”

“ So I must tell you,” resumed Madame du Lude, “ that M. le Duc de Rougelaure is the man to whom I mean to give my daughter. I know that he has frequented your house a great deal, and that you and your husband entertain a warm friendship for him. Now frankly, and upon your conscience, dear duchess, what do you think of him ? ”

"What do I think of him?"

"Yes."

"Frankly?"

"Of course."

"Upon my conscience?"

"Certainly."

Madame de Lesdiguières coughed again. Hers was a very stubborn cough.

"Well, countess, I will answer you in all sincerity. . . . M. de Roquelaure is a man of honour in the full meaning of the word. I think a woman could but be proud of him and the sentiments which he cherishes."

"That is the impression he has made upon me," said the Comtesse du Lude, "but certain gossip has reached my ears . . . they tell of some wild adventures he has had, and intrigues with women."

"Has anyone's name been mentioned to you?" asked Madame de Lesdiguières with a shudder.

"No . . . but I have heard it said that in matters of love M. de Roquelaure was without scruples. . . . Have you any knowledge on this point? Is it the truth? Or is it a slander?"

"Listen," replied Madame de Lesdiguières after a rather long pause. "Monsieur de Roquelaure has a singular disposition. He is a strange mixture of chivalrous devotion, amiable faithlessness, and careless frivolity. The result is a very taking character. Sometimes one may hate him for an hour; but, do

what one will, one soon begins to like him again. When he is ungrateful, he is so blind to the fact that it would seem ungracious to show a clearer insight than his own; when he deceives, he does it in such good faith, with so perfect a lack of ill intention, that one is instantly inclined to pardon him. His invariable love for dark tresses can only be compared to that which he loudly professes for locks of blonde hues, especially if they be flaxen or verging to a bronze gold. He would give up his life for a fine dark eye, but he is equally willing to die for a pair of blue ones. In a general way, he loves whatever is graceful, pleasing, attractive and out of the common. In a word, he prides himself upon not being exclusive. Certain carping spirits have sometimes made this mutability a reproach against him, and it is indeed well calculated to mislead the closest observer. Such a judgment is wrong. In my view his blood is prodigiously active, and a man's sentiments are but sparks of the fire burning in his soul. If this fire is extinguished, there is, of course, neither light nor conflagration. M. de Roquelaure is not in such a case. He lives his twenty-four hours a day, for he lives even while he sleeps. And in all conscience we cannot demand of a man thus fully occupied the regularity of habits and customs which would only befit a fool or . . . an idiot. . . . As for his other qualities, I think no one can deny to M. de Roquelaure the only

one that is really essential. He has proved his courage in a score of fights. His nobility is beyond dispute, despite the malicious attacks of certain clumsy enemies, and if he may fairly be accused of levity in love, it must be owned that in friendship he is of unblemished fidelity and constancy. There, dear countess, is a portrait that you may consider little loaded with details, but I think it is according to nature. If you fear it is too flattering, ask others, as for example M. de Saint-Simon. . . .”

“Nay, that I shall not do,” cried the Countess hotly. “For I know he envies him, and his opinion has no weight with me. I would rather abide by what I have just heard, for even M. de Roquelaure’s defects seem to me the most encouraging that are possible when I consider the future; I hope that the frivolous lover will become a steady husband.”

“And I, for my part, am sure of it,” said the Duchess; “to whom should a man be constant, if not to Mademoiselle du Lude?”

The ladies exchanged affectionate farewells, and then I emerged from my hiding-place.

I was so moved that I could do nothing but kneel at the feet of the admirable Duchesse de Lesdiguières and stammer out some disconnected thanks.

“Rise,” said she to me, “rise, sir. A man only kneels before a woman whom he loves. Do not show bad faith to her who will soon bear the name of

Roquelaure, at the very moment when I have made myself surety for your character."

At this point some incident occurred which compelled us to part. But there were tears in her eyes, and in mine as well.

The marriage took place, as I have said, a few days later.

Is it my nature which is unsuited to wedded life? Or did my star shed misfortune on the union?

The fact is that it was of a short duration. . . .

My poor wife, that admirable creature, of whom I was so unworthy, and whose perfection seemed divine, died in childbed, in all the splendour of her youth and beauty. Her sufferings are beyond description, and her last moments were spent in agony.

It was a terrible blow, and I was for long smitten down by it.

Her death almost coincided with that of M. d'Elbeuf.

The reader will forgive me if I avoid the details of so sad and terrible a time. The image of that lovely inanimate statue, which I had clasped in a last convulsive embrace, pursued me even into the monastery to which I obtained leave to retire for some time. Lost in my grief, I bore the solitude well; it was but the consequence of a voluntary exile. My soul had been so cruelly wounded that it had need of the consolations of prayer and meditation.

CHAPTER XLVIII

The Duchesse de La Vallière—I go to the Palais with Louis XIV.—A carriage drive in a coach—The King's secrets—I tell him the story of his amours with La Vallière—The key of the boudoir—A disagreeable mission with which I am charged—The royal *tête-à-tête*—I listen at the doors—An incomprehensible conversation—A King annoyed—I ask His Majesty the cause of his sadness—The confidences with which the King honours me—He will not dare to appear again before La Vallière—I reassure him—His Majesty takes his revenge—A Gascon.

THE historians and the writers of memoirs will have so much to say of the Duchesse de La Vallière, that I shall not think of giving a long account of the king's *liaison* with her. So I shall only speak from my own memory and to make public a slight circumstance which was known to no one at the court, whereof I was at once the witness and, as it were, the confidant.

Mademoiselle de La Vallière, by the influence of Mademoiselle de Choisy, had been appointed to the suite of Madame, and usually resided in the Palais-Royal. Hither it was that the king, avoiding his wife's company, came to seek from love those distractions of which his young fancy felt so constant and ardent a need.

One day his majesty said to me :

“Roquelaure, come with me. There is a coach in waiting for us. I have said that we are going to visit Madame, and thence for a drive to Saint-Cloud. Whatever happens, and whatever you are asked, you will not deny what I have said. What I mean to do requires the utmost secrecy.”

I bowed and followed the king. When we had started, the king saw that I was smiling.

“What are you laughing at ? ” he asked me.

“Pardon me, sire, I am laughing at the illusion that you wilfully form for yourself when you believe that secrecy is possible in what concerns your majesty’s movements.”

“What? Cannot I, like everybody else . . . ? ”

“Hide your feelings, conceal your intentions, mystify the curious about your plans? No, sire. He who is a king lives on a pedestal on which all eyes are fixed. The king, do what he will, is always the best watched man in his kingdom. Will your majesty allow me to justify what I have said by proofs ? ”

“Yes, Roquelaure, yes.”

“Well, sire, I have allowed myself to make observation of you for some time, and, without much difficulty, I discovered, beneath the profound concealment by which you masked it, the solution of the puzzle which you must have thought that no one guessed.”

"Come, come, continue. I will not deny that there is a puzzle. But it would surprise me a great deal if you knew the answer to it."

"At Fontainebleau, sire, whither you made such frequent visits, you made a display of some respectful affection or other for Madame, while the Comte de Guiche showed the greatest devotion to a certain Mademoiselle de La Vallière."

Louis XIV. started.

"You see, sire, I had guessed right. M. de Guiche was enamoured of Madame, and your heart beat for Mademoiselle de La Vallière. No one was mistaken about it, we all saw it plainly."

"'Tis like the Inquisition," cried the king.

"'Tis neither more nor less, sire, than a consequence of your exalted station. A common *liaison* is a tiny star lost in a mist. But the least amour of your majesty glitters and shines like the sun."

"Flatterer!" murmured the king.

"Well, sire, would you have me tell you what you intend at this moment?"

"I should be flattered, Roquelaure, to hear it from your own lips."

"Then here it is, sire. . . . The coachman has his orders in advance. We are going to the Palais-Royal. After a visit of ceremony to Madame and a glance exchanged with Mademoiselle de La Vallière, we shall withdraw together. But when we have come to the middle of the great gallery your majesty will

disappear into a little cabinet, the key of which I saw you take just now, and there Mademoiselle de La Vallière will soon join you. As for me, it is probable that your majesty will order me to leave the building, re-enter the carriage, take the air under the goodly trees of Saint-Cloud, and come back to meet you afterwards, all discreetly and without raising a cry about it."

"On the last point you are wrong, Roquelaure. The carriage will go empty to Saint-Cloud; you will watch."

"I am entirely at my sovereign's orders," said I with a profound bow. "But, if I am not too curious, how have you managed on the other days, sire? This is the first time your majesty has claimed of me the little service that I shall be so honoured and so happy to render you. . . ."

"So you are not so well informed as you seem to be," said the king; "for though I have gone into the little cabinet once before, La Vallière did not come . . . so . . ."

"So? I pray you, sire, finish the sentence."

"So that I have not yet been . . . alone with her."

"Indeed! To-day will be your first *tête-à-tête* with her?"

"Yes, the first."

"I own my mistake; I thought your majesty was much further advanced than that."

At this moment we reached the Palais-Royal.

Madame was indisposed, and from the first it was easy to see that our visit would be extremely short. Mademoiselle de La Vallière was working, near the window, at some work of embroidery. The king drew up to her and let fall upon her lap a letter, which she took up blushing. A quarter of an hour later we withdrew and walked up and down in the gallery two or three times. The king pretended to be looking at the pictures, and I followed his example exactly. When the guard had presented arms, I took the captain aside and told him that his majesty desired privacy, and that it would be well to dismiss the halberdiers till they were required to form in line as the king went out. The captain obeyed, and at last we were alone in the gallery. Louis XIV. drew a little golden key from his breeches and opened the room in question.

“Roquelaure,” said he to me, “you see that door on the left; La Vallière will enter by it. You are to go out by the door on the right, which leads to a large hall through which the palace servants sometimes pass. You will wait there, and you will not move, and upon your head be it that no one enters.”

“No one will enter, sire.”

I took my post, and Louis XIV. shut himself within the boudoir. Some minutes passed without the least sound being heard within or without. But soon a click, which could easily be recognised as that of a lock, informed me that the letter had produced

its effect, and that the pretty maid-of-honour had not been strong enough to resist the supplications of her royal lover.

I own that when I thought over it I was a little mortified by the part I was playing in this meeting. Sentinel to an amorous encounter! If it was not discreditable, in view of the illustrious personage in question, it was none the less ill suited to my temperament. So I was soon beset by impatience. No one crossed the room in which I stood, and this rendered my services almost useless. . . . I came up to the door of the boudoir on tiptoe, being very curious, I admit, to know how matters stood, and learn in what new and strange way a king might press his suit upon a fair one whom he really loved.

My first efforts went for nothing, or to be more exact, I heard so little that it is not worth speaking of. There were long sighs which, upon my honour, seemed rather to convey annoyance than tenderness, detached monosyllables which had not that fiery accent that would at once have interpreted itself to my mind. They seemed to be rather reproaches, groans, complaints. At last two chairs were pushed apart with a noise, and I distinctly caught these words of the king's:

"No . . . leave me . . . I am a wretch . . . a miserable man . . . and my pretensions to love will but seem to you a gross insult in the future . . ."

"Louis . . . Louis," murmured the sweet voice

of La Vallière, "if anyone has done harm in this, it is rather . . ."

The rest was said in so low a voice that I did not hear it. But the king, who no doubt found more difficulty in controlling his voice, resumed eagerly :

"No, once again no ! I will remain no longer with her to whom my presence is an insult. . . . Farewell . . . farewell . . ."

I hurried back to my appointed place, and pretended to be toying with my sword. It was time I did so . . . for Louis XIV. now appeared.

He was in some disorder. His rumpled lace bore witness to the ardour he had displayed in the combat. And he was as red in the face as any little abbé whom a pretty girl has looked in the eyes.

His majesty came up to me with a distraught air and murmured :

"Let us go, let us go . . ."

"At once, sire, but the carriage has certainly not had time to get to Saint-Cloud and back."

"You are right. . . . Well, let us walk here while we await it."

The king began to walk up and down with so rapid a stride that I found it hard to keep pace with him. It was a good ten minutes before he opened his lips, and in the meanwhile he gave no sign but some gestures of mortification, while his eyes rested sadly sometimes on the ceiling and sometimes on the floor.

However, as this dumb-show might well finish by

becoming intolerable to both of us, I attempted to bring it to an end by respectfully questioning his majesty.

"Are you not satisfied, sire?"

"Roquelaure! Roquelaure! Do you put that silly question to me to deride me?"

"I shall not attempt to exculpate my silliness, sire, your majesty has made mention of it, and I will not haggle about such a trifle. . . . But that I have failed in that veneration which I have vowed to you, that is another matter, and I will defend myself against that charge like a devil. But how would it have been surprising if you had left the charming La Vallière with every ground for happiness?"

"As a matter of fact, I have come back humiliated, desperate, wrecked. I shall never summon courage to appear before her again."

"Oh, oh! What has happened?"

"The most odious and ridiculous mishap . . ."

"She repelled you?"

"Far from it!"

"You were interrupted?"

"Would to Heaven we had been!"

"Ah! I am getting beyond my depth, sire. 'Tis true that I am easily carried that far, for I am no giant; but usually my senses serve me better, and I feel that I must be growing old."

"I can very well understand," replied the king, "that you do not divine what happened to me, my

poor Roquelaure, and in this case your coming short does you honour. . . . A man can only understand so much as he is capable of, and I am sure you are not capable of such an enormity."

"Though I know not of what we deal, yet it is plain your majesty flatters me. But come, a little openness, and give me the whole of your confession. Perchance I may give you sound advice."

"Advice! . . . Poor coinage, my dear Roquelaure. 'Tis not words that should be current in such a case, but deeds."

"I take the meaning less and less."

"Well, then, listen to me," resumed Louis XIV. "You know the adorable La Vallière. I have no need to tell you of her expressive eyes, her scarlet lips, her waving hair, her slight waist, her little feet and her white shoulders. I have no need to tell you how sweet her voice and how full her whole person of charm and seductiveness. You know all that, I am sure. Well, just now in that room, where we were alone together, she abandoned herself to me, she fell into my arms, I felt her heart beating upon mine, her forehead touched mine, I respired the perfume of her lips . . . and in spite of all this . . ."

The king stopped; I repeated very gently:

"In spite of all this?"

"In spite of it all I was cold, frozen, stockish. Her body touched mine, she clasped me in one of those delicious embraces which would restore life to a

dead man, but all in me was null—the feeling of happiness, of love . . . even the mere desire . . .”

“Eh, egad, sire,” cried I with an utter astonishment, “do you mean by chance that you . . .?”

“Yes, of course,” replied the king, with some slight signs of impatience. “Do you not understand French, and must I give it you in detail? See . . . that statue that you behold there, between those two windows, would have done as much as I!”

The king had no need to carry his explanation further, and I made him perceive, by a gesture, that no further word was wanted. At the same moment we heard the sound of carriage-wheels, and moved towards the staircase. The guard hurried to salute, and we mounted into the carriage again.

When I thought that the king had sufficiently recovered from the severe experience to which the very excess of his passion had subjected him, I attempted to console him and assure him that everyone had to undergo these accursed hours in life in which a man might think himself bewitched. My arguments probably mitigated his grief, but he none the less continued his plaint, saying that he was ruined for ever in La Vallière's eyes, and that he should die of mortification the first time he met her.

Louis XIV. easily recovered from this *contre-temps*, and did not die of his mortification as he might have feared.

The proof is, that a year after this incident he

publicly recognised a charming little daughter of the Duchesse de La Vallière, to the great annoyance of the queen and of all those who, far or near, had secret pretensions upon his majesty's heart.

On the night of that same day I had a lively altercation with a foolish kind of fellow, who elbowed me grossly by the Feuillants. He was a Gascon, by name Préchartrain, who was insolent when he had to do with a cur, but altered his tune in a singular fashion when he got as good as he gave. That happened on this occasion. Préchartrain, questioned by me as to the rudeness of his bearing, made a show of challenging me. It was dark at the time. Then I threw open my cloak, let him see my sword, and gave him my name.

This sobered him.

"Ah, if I had known that it was our dear Roque-laure!" cried he.

"What would you have done?"

"Instead of shoving him with my elbow I should have offered him my hand."

There was no answer to be made to a jape of that kind, and I asked him, without thinking very much about what I was saying:

"Where were you going, Préchartrain?"

"To a charming girl who is awaiting me at the gate of the Innocents."

"A well-chosen place for a young girl."

"And her virginal purity justifies the name of

the spot where she seems to have sought a habitation as if by design," said Préchartrain foolishly.

"So," replied I, "she is innocent?"

"She is a virgin, my dear Roquelaure."

"In what sense do you mean that?"

"Egad . . . how is it usually meant?"

"You mean to say she is a true maid?"

"Certainly."

"H'm, h'm, I should be the last to deny the virginity of your little wonder, Préchartrain. . . . But with your leave, I will undertake to show you a . . ."

"A what?"

"A true maid."

"Where?"

"Quite close by. Look at your sword."

Préchartrain went away crestfallen. Upon this subject I remember a story that I will now relate.

CHAPTER XLIX

M. de Préchartrain—His avarice—Portrait of Madame de Préchartrain—Provincial ladies are full of Paris and Versailles—Domestic squabbles—The arrival in Paris—The air of the capital suits young women—Préchartrain is not so pleased—He wishes to return to Quercy—A very opportune fainting-fit—A woman who understands life—Médianoche—The Chevalier de Plessac—Madame de Nointel and Roquebrune—Supper—Préchartrain's rage—The means his wife took to quiet him—An appeal to a father-in-law—A sovereign remedy for Préchartrain's conjugal revolt—His wit—A wretched jest he made at my expense—My answer.

THIS Monsieur de Préchartrain was the most avaricious man in the world. He had given up appearing at court because he had to change his coat and breeches too often. In 1655 he had had a satin suit of a violet colour made by Bussy-Rabutin's tailor, and it still lasted him in the spring of 1662.

But nothing will give a better idea of his avarice than what happened between him and his wife when they had been married about sixteen months. She was a Mademoiselle Daubreval, belonging to a very good family of Le Quercy, and her dower, as may be imagined, was to be considerable; for Préchartrain would never have married her without the hope of a good windfall present and future too.

The marriage took place at Cahors, and was a very poor affair, especially on Préchartrain's side. The wedding-gifts were of a scanty appearance, the bridegroom's jewelry was not wonderful, and the management of the ceremony was as mean as possible. The town had talked a great deal about it, and the priest, who was of a humorous nature, delighted to tell that Préchartrain's marriage, at church, had cost the noble bridegroom just half as dear as that of his apothecary, who was a man of note in the countryside, a week earlier.

However, Mademoiselle Daubreval had not seemed to show temper over the parsimony, though it was almost insulting.

Her father himself had shut his eyes to it, and for some time Préchartrain nursed the hope that in his household there would be nothing to run counter to his mania for pinching and saving.

But he had reckoned, we will not say without his host, but without his wife.

Madame de Préchartrain had the fresh beauty of twenty summers and the skill of a woman of forty. She knew the value of prudence, and her conduct was a masterpiece of perseverance and cleverness on a small scale. In the seclusion of the country she had heard mention of Versailles, of Marly, of Louis XIV., the Dauphin, Lauzun, and all those dazzling marvels which at that time made up the splendid earthly paradise known as the court of France. Her birth

was not of the highest, but yet was such as to gain her admittance everywhere.

Thus she had in her possession the golden key which was to open wide for her the doors of the temple where she thought that she could play the part of priestess, if not of divinity, as well as anyone else.

She hinted as much to Préchartrain.

Préchartrain cried aloud against it.

She left him in peace for a fortnight. Then one morning, when he had received his rents, she returned to the charge.

Préchartrain did not cry out so mightily . . . but he grumbled longer.

He is beginning to be accustomed to it, thought Madame de Préchartrain. We will not let him lose so excellent a habit.

And from week to week she took care to din the same proposal into him, taking it from every side, presenting it under every aspect—a form of torment which women understand to perfection, especially when some sentiment of coquetry puts the instrument in their hands, and the victim is a husband.

The effect was delayed, but it came. One fine day, Préchartrain, tired of striving and of hearing the same thing repeated, consented to take the road for Paris. It was a necessary stage upon the way to Versailles.

However, up to this point he complied with a fairly good grace, and had not complained overmuch.

His wife managed to convince him that the climate of that part of France did not suit her health, and as a consequence the worthy soul wished to go to Paris, as some go to the sea-coast, or take a journey in hot countries.

They set out, and there was a great deal of ill-humour on the way. But what did this matter to the fair Madame de Préchartrain? Her husband's vexation was the smallest of her anxieties.

The important thing was to get there, and they got there in due time.

Then, whether it were from happiness, or really from the effects of the air, Madame de Préchartrain became fresher, fairer, and more brilliant than ever. Every day she went to see her old friends from the convent school, who were all making their way in the world, and for the most part were connected with the society of the court. But the chief of these friends was Madame de Nointel, who was accounted one of the wittiest and merriest *viveuses* of her time, and she certainly deserved her reputation. Mesdames de Nointel and de Préchartrain were everywhere to be seen together, walking, at assemblies, and at the play, so that they were called the inseparables, and the Marquise's renown was soon in part transferred to the provincial lady who had fled from Cahors.

Préchartrain was full of mortification, and he grumbled and grew visibly thinner.

At length came the presentation at court. At this

the miser felt his vitals gnawed by a burning poison ; it was agony to him ; he flatly refused to carry it through, and declared that it was *his will* they should go back to Le Quercy.

At the word Quercy, Madame de Préchartrain had recourse to an expedient which she had been careful not to take advantage of till then, guessing that she would have real need of it some day, and considering it indispensable to preserve the method for decisive occasions.

She pretended to experience that convulsive shivering which seizes all the limbs in the space of a second . . . then, when her husband ruthlessly repeated his ultimatum, she suddenly staggered, her legs failed her, and she fell in a swoon.

The scene had been prepared. The Marquise de Nointel ran in, exclaimed upon Préchartrain's tyranny, and told him he was no better than a fool to set himself against a proceeding which was not only the most obvious and natural in the world, but such as to increase his own honour and consideration beyond what could be estimated. Préchartrain, besides being niggardly, stood in great awe of what people thought, and immediately perceived that if he persisted in his refusal, he would be the butt of everybody before the following morning.

So he gave his consent, and this was a new feather which they had plucked from him. On the following evening he was led rather than went to Versailles.

His wife looked admirable ; but he was as red as a turkeycock.

It should be added that he had not determined upon undertaking the expense of the two toilettes (his wife's and his own) but on the condition that the tailor should not ask for payment for six months. Perhaps he had done this for a good miser's reason, to wit, that in six months he might be dead and then he would escape payment.

Once started upon the path of pleasure, Madame de Préchartrain showed no tendency to check herself. After the taste for extravagance came the taste for amorous adventures. Madame de Préchartrain, desirous of making trial of everything, fixed her choice upon five or six gentlemen in succession, each one of a better build than the last, and Préchartrain's life was turned into a perpetual nightmare.

One night he returned to his house in the Rue Saint-Antoine, thinking of his wife's follies and adding up accounts in his mind, whereof the total seemed to him deplorable, when he was very much surprised to see his hearth illumined by an unaccustomed light. He stopped in amazement and listened. People were laughing and singing, and, what annoyed his ears more keenly, they were clinking glasses. . . .

So he was giving a *médianoche* and supper at his house . . . and he did not know it !

Then he remembered that he had told his wife, when he left her, that he would visit one of his farms,

situated some four leagues from Versailles, and that it was very likely he would sleep there. That had been his intention ; but some unforeseen obstacle had prevented him from carrying it out at the very moment of starting.

The opportunity seemed to have been taken as a very favourable one for a little nocturnal fête. Sometimes the hours hang so heavily, and happy moments are so rare ! Madame de Préchartrain had apparently argued thus ; and she had asked to a pleasant and inviting little supper a friend of her own, M. le Chevalier de Plessac, a fair young fellow with a sparkling eye, and a very agreeable couple, not less inclined to mirth, being the Marquise de Nointel and a certain Roquebrune, a kind of rascal who got himself received as a gentleman, though I think he had never clearly proved a single quartering of nobility ; but certain women, and Madame de Nointel in particular, were easily attracted to him, because he was a well-looking fellow enough, square-shouldered, a good trencherman, facile in love matters, and discreet.

Préchartrain was not long-suffering in reality, and, booted and spurred as he was, he burst into the midst of the party when the last thing they had in mind was prudence.

At the time when the unwelcome guest arrived the ladies' hair was somewhat dishevelled, their dresses somewhat loosened at the neck, their faces

high-coloured, their eyes flashing, their postures easy, and the bottles were nearly empty, and certain fastenings were not so closed up as they should have been.

It was the Gorgon's head. Silence reigned, except that Madame de Nointel burst out laughing and cried :

"Why, 'tis our good friend Préchartrain ! Pray be seated, Préchartrain ; you shall sup with us."

But Préchartrain was in no mood to laugh. Jealousy made him surly, and he seemed disposed to break everything. Thereupon Roquebrune rose and took him by the arm, and, leading him to an open window, said calmly :

"Measure the distance from here to the street. . . . If you say a single word or move a muscle I will throw you out of the window."

Poor Préchartrain fought with all his might in Roquebrune's grip ; but he was not nearly so strong, and all his mighty exertions were without result.

Madame de Préchartrain herself ran up to rescue him.

"Leave us," said she to Roquebrune and to Madame de Nointel ; "I will undertake to pacify him . . ."

The night was one long strife. Préchartrain made a complete list of all the grievances he had against his wife. But, odd as it may seem, what he reproached her with most bitterly was not her infidelity, but the wasting of what he called his savings.

They could not come to any understanding, and on the following day Préchartrain set out for Cahors, declaring that he would see his wife's father, and would make her return to her duty.

"If I could have her shut up in a convent," he thought as his coach rolled along the highroad, "she would cost me nothing in future. Ah! that would be like paradise."

He thought no more of the Chevalier de Plessac than if he had never existed.

When he got to Cahors he sought out old Daubreval; during nearly two hours he detailed with great fulness the misdoings of his wife, and the sum of what he said was that if he did not receive justice from others, he would get it for himself by causing an exposure, the effects of which would be borne by those who deserved to bear them.

Monsieur Daubreval was a subtle old fellow, and he understood his son-in-law perfectly, so that he saw quite well where the shoe pinched, and replied with much dignity:

"I share your views in every respect, my son-in-law, and think my daughter unpardonable. If you really think her unworthy of pardon, if you think it your duty to show yourself relentless and to proceed to the last extremities, I will join with you to punish her, lest it be said that the father was less severe than the husband. . . . *I will disinheritor her!*"

A quarter of an hour after this solemn sentence

had been pronounced Préchartrain, like a man stunned or beside his wits, asked for horses again, and took leave of his father-in-law.

He never spoke to his wife again of her expenses or of the supper or of the little Chevalier de Plessac. He began once more to look on Madame de Préchartrain as a gold mine on which there would be splendid returns sooner or later.

But, by way of precaution, he took good care that she should have a baby.

I never had much to do with Préchartrain. However, I often saw him in Paris during the year in which Queen Christina of Sweden visited France, and caused a stir at Fontainebleau by the murder of her equerry Monaldeschi.

We were not on good terms, and I remember only one circumstance in our intercourse, which may serve to show the dulness of his feelings and his wit. One day he thought fit to play at light and amiable banter with me, and said, with reference to certain complaints which a lady had made about me :

“ Ah, my dear Monsieur de Roquelaure, they always told me you were ungrateful, but I would never believe it.”

“ And I, my dear Monsieur de Préchartrain,” I answered with all seriousness, “ was never told but once that you were an ass, and I believed it instantly.”

CHAPTER L

La Vallière's star sets—The campaign in Flanders—The siege of Lille—The court at Arras—An anonymous letter—The Queen's generosity—A few words about the Marquise de Montespan — Louis XIV. sends for me — The mysterious passage—My meeting with Madame de Montespan—I should like to try again — A journey on horseback—I return to Paris with MM. de Piennes and de Saulx at two o'clock in the morning—We hold a council about how to make the best of the night—Madame de Courcelles-Marguenat—An ill-suited pair—Madame de Courcelles' confidences—I try to justify her good opinion—Supper—Two beds—A reminiscence of conjugal affection—A father for the child of Brancas — I am rewarded for my trouble beyond my expectation.

HIS MAJESTY LOUIS XIV. did not give his subjects an example of constancy in love. The hour came when the glory and influence of La Vallière were things of the past, and in spite of the really noble *tendresse* of this charming beauty, the king's passion began to cool, and even threatened to become extinct.

The first indications that we had at court of the change which was proceeding in the king's affections was during the time when his majesty was engaged upon the campaign in Flanders.

The siege of Lille commenced in August. The French nobles, stimulated by the king's presence, wrought prodigies of valour, and the Marquis de Péguillin specially distinguished himself in the most honourable fashion.

On hearing that this gentleman had carried a demilune sword in hand in such wise as to disconcert the enemy by his first attack, and that he had been given hostages whom he had immediately sent to the king, Mademoiselle de Montpensier nearly fainted; she already entertained for him that romantic and devoted sentiment of which she appeared to be proud.

During this time the court was at Arras.

It was about this time that the queen received by post an unsigned letter which seemed to make a deep impression on her. Her feelings were so stirred that she desired to be alone, and dismissed all her women, keeping only Mademoiselle de Montpensier with her.

"Your majesty seems indisposed," said this lady. "Shall I summon help?"

"Help!" the Queen answered sadly, "none is possible against the ills from which I suffer."

Mademoiselle said nothing.

"Are you my friend?" asked the Queen at length, extending her hand to the duchess.

"Give me some opportunity to show my devotion, and you will not again ask me such questions."

Mademoiselle took the letter, unfolded it, and read as follows :

"MADAME LA REINE,—One who stands too close to that which is happening can neither see it nor judge about it. Your majesty dwells at court, and nothing that is done and spoken of there comes to your knowledge. So it would be no bad thing, as I think, if some charitable soul should now and then open your eyes to your own interests. That is what I shall try to do herein, Madame la Reine, by warning you about a circumstance which has very evidently escaped your observation. The king, as all know, withdrew his affections from you to bestow them upon Mademoiselle de La Vallière. That scandal was too noticeable to have passed unperceived by you. But now there is a fresh change in the king's mind, and as your majesty might derive advantage from this development of your husband's feelings by trying to bring him back to you, I think it my duty to reveal the truth to you.

"The ascendancy of Mademoiselle de La Vallière is at an end, and she who will probably succeed her on her throne of scandal and impiety is Madame de Montespan. My intention is not to draw down your anger upon that lady; for it is but natural that the dazzling glory of Louis the Great should have an influence upon tender hearts which they can scarcely resist; but there is a woman whom I think I ought to denounce to you as having carried on the whole intrigue and promoted this conclusion to it by devilish machinations.

"That woman is Madame de Montausier.

"She it is who, while your majesty was at Compiègne, procured interviews with the king for Madame de Montespan. She it is who abused your trust with shameful lies, when, under the form of officious confidences, she sent you false reports as to how his majesty spent his time.

"Do not think, Madame la Reine, that in writing thus to you I am impelled by other motives than the

profound devotion and true sympathy I have for your royal person. I have been desirous to inform you as to what concerns you so closely, and shall think myself fully successful if this indiscretion of mine confounds the concerted projects of your enemies.

"I beg your majesty to believe that no one of her subjects is more attached than I to the cause of her glory and happiness."

Mademoiselle let the letter fall from her hand.

"And there is no signature?" said the Queen.

"That is just the reason, madame," said Mademoiselle de Montpensier, "why you should attach no weight to this asseveration. To write a letter without signing it is always the act of a coward, who fears the responsibility for his deeds, or of an enemy who dreads to find the lie given to his words. I believe no syllable of what I have just read."

"It is different with me," replied the Queen gravely, "for I believe it all."

"What will your majesty do?"

"You shall see."

The queen rang the bell, and an usher entered.

"Go and find M. le Marquis de Montpesat for me."

The Marquis de Montpesat was Governor of Arras, and had been assiduous in doing the honours to her majesty since the court had arrived at the town. He at once obeyed the summons which had been sent to him.

"Monsieur le Marquis," said the Queen to him, "do you know where the king is?"

“ His majesty is still at Lille, madame.”

“ Well, Marquis, have a good horse saddled, choose the surest and the most discreet of your men, and send him to Lille at the top of his speed. Tell him, when he is come thither, to hand this message to the king himself; you understand, to the king . . . to no one else but him . . .”

“ Your orders shall be obeyed, madame.”

M. de Montpesat left the royal presence.

This magnanimity and generosity were in the queen's character. She had but a poor recompense for these excellent qualities of hers. The king's disposition remained the same, and—to make mention of no more than the incident with which we are now concerned—the *liaison* which had begun between him and Madame de Montespan grew stronger and more pronounced.

Soon, as everybody knows, the connection was publicly acknowledged. Did Louis XIV. love this favourite of his as he had loved Mademoiselle de La Vallière? Who can tell? Love is like the horizon in a mountainous country. Its aspect changes as the traveller rises or descends. But it is beyond question that he was thought for long to be truly enamoured. M. le Duc de Maine, and afterwards Mademoiselle de Nantes, were the living tokens of this royal foible.

I knew Madame de Montespan but little, in this sense, that I seldom had any close intercourse with her. But whenever I think of that charming woman,

I recall what happened to me at Versailles, one evening when the king was giving a grand entertainment to some foreign ambassadors.

The king had done me the honour to send for me before the assembly hour to speak privately to me upon some subject or other, which has escaped my memory, and I remained in the king's closet while the last touches were put to his majesty's toilette. When this was done, he said to me :

“Go, Roquelaure, and await me in the great gallery, and tell the people who are impatient to see me that I shall soon come.”

I bowed and withdrew, and was preparing to retire by the same way as I had entered, when the king said to his barber :

“Open that little door for Roquelaure. See,” added his majesty, turning to me, “I wish you to know the way of access for my intimate friends. This passage will take you straight to the *salle du trône*.”

I thanked his majesty again, and followed the indication which had been given to me.

The passage was not very well lighted, and there was a sharp turn in it about half-way.

Hurrying to get to the other end, I was walking very quickly, almost running. When I came to the angle, I found myself face to face with a woman splendidly attired and of dazzling beauty.

Without meaning it, and with so rapid a move-

ment that I could scarce take account of what I did, I ran against her, and in the obscurity my hand, put forth to lessen the shock, was lodged, in perfect innocence, in a charming place which heretofore I had only dared to survey with my eyes.

The woman was Madame de Montespan, who, I may say in passing, wore her dresses very low.

Naturally she cried out.

"Ah, Marquise," I exclaimed, taking both her hands, but only as if to implore forgiveness, "'twas done without intention, I swear, but I should like to do it again."

At the time when this pleasant little incident befell, Madame de Montespan was not yet the king's avowed mistress. M. de Montespan had not been banished from the court, and Mademoiselle de La Vallière had not become a Carmelite. The king and the future favourite had got no further than stolen meetings, and it happened that I surprised an important secret by mere chance.

I need not say that I scrupulously kept silence about it. Men of my character and mettle need not be suspected in such matters, for they know too well how dangerous is a word said at hazard, or an allusion or conjecture expressed, even with no ill-will, for the like may expose anyone in the world to the dangers of calumny and slander. For my part, I always listened without hearing and looked without seeing.

As to the low cut of Madame de Montespan's

dresses (and the fact is that she carried the fashion to a point which frightened a great many worthy people), I remember a witty remark made by a wench who often came to Ninon's, when the Chevalier de Grammont, so noted for his cheating, once reproved her for only wearing high-cut bodices.

"'Tis very well," said she, "for the ladies of the court, whether they have virtue or affect it, to show their breasts for nothing, but we, Chevalier, are not rich enough to afford it."

Half-an-hour after the little incident I have narrated the king appeared amidst the court. It was as if the sun had risen in all his splendour. The ambassadors who had come to pay their *devoirs* were amazed by the impressive spectacle presented, and no doubt they had never seen anything of the kind.

Madame de Montespan, at the moment when she passed near to me, greeted me with a friendly smile, and blushed as she did so.

Evidently the little familiarity I had allowed myself with her had not lowered me in her good graces.

That night we made a party with M. de Saulx and the Marquis de Piennes to return from Versailles to Paris on horseback. We enacted a thousand follies on the way, making incursion into nearly all the wineshops, knocking at our friends' doors and retreating at a gallop when they appeared at the windows in nightcaps and nightgowns to see who had rapped. Thus we came to Paris about two o'clock in the morning.

At first our intention was to go to bed, but we were so wide-awake that bed seemed a lamentable prospect.

"Where could we go to-night?" I said to De Piennes.

"Where is there supper?" added M. de Saulx.

"Gentlemen," said the Marquis de Piennes, "if there be no better plan among you, I propose we pass the rest of the night at Madame de Courcelles'."

"What is on foot in that good lady's house?" asked De Saulx, who did not know her.

"What is on foot?" I answered in a solemn tone. "Everything—love included."

"Then we go to La Courcelles'!" cried De Saulx.

"Prudence, my dear friend; the husband is as jealous as a Turk."

"And does he get any good by it?"

"He gets the same return as all husbands who think well to be jealous."

"And that is . . .?"

"That he is a little more . . . hoodwinked than those who by temperament or design shut their eyes."

"You shall introduce me," said M. de Saulx.

"You shall come in between us two," said De Piennes, pointing to me; "so you may be sure you will be welcome."

We pushed on, and in less than ten minutes we were in front of the Hôtel de Courcelles.

Our notion proved a good one. There was a de-

lightful fête at Courcelles-Marguenat's, with cards and dancing, and a great deal of merriment; and they talked of supping, or rather breakfasting, at three in the morning.

We had arrived in the very nick of time.

MM. de Saulx and de Piennes soon caught the tone of the jovial company, and I found little trouble in getting to the same pitch. Though it was a long time since I had been to the Hôtel de Courcelles, we found ourselves at once in the midst of acquaintances. Madame de Chauvry, who was said to have been whipped by her husband one day, was dancing with Rambouillet like a madwoman; Madame d'Alais was making love in a corner with Lillebonne; and Madame Pilon was playing some game of cards or other with Madame de Choisy, and, having some dispute with her opponent about a doubtful hand, she was overwhelming her with anger and abuse, while everyone else was laughing about it.

As I was in a mood for a jest, I threw myself into Madame Pilon's quarrel, with no notion who was right and who wrong, and took sides against her simply to make her angrier.

While I was at this, I felt a soft little hand grasp mine, and at the same time a sweet voice said to me:

"Cher duc, cannot one have even a word with you?"

I turned about.

It was the mistress of the house in person, Madame de Courcelles-Marguenat.

Madame de Courcelles was quite a small woman, but of an admirable shape, with very elegant feet, and eyes that would have got ten monasteries full of Benedictines damned.

Her coquetry was that of a sprite, and her habitual gaiety had almost passed into a proverb.

So I was very much surprised to see that her face was clouded, and that there were even tears in her eyes.

"Now, 'fore gad," cried I, "dear Countess, have you cause of complaint against anything or anyone? Speak . . . you know how devoted I am to you."

It is a fact that I was a friend—and a devoted friend—of all women who were young, pretty and kind.

"It is just because I know I can trust you," replied Madame de Courcelles, "that I thought of begging your advice in circumstances . . . that are very grave and very critical. . . ."

These lugubrious words sounded strange in the mouth of Madame de Courcelles. I was keenly intrigued, and besought her to explain.

"Not here," said she. "We might be overheard, and I should be ruined."

Ruined! . . . The word alarmed me. I instantly thought of her husband's jealousy, and imagined all sorts of horrors.

"Where shall we go and talk?" I resumed, offering her my hand.

“In my room. They are playing basset there. The players will pay no attention at all to us.”

It was certainly a well-chosen place for confidences. The players were in the middle of the room, and on each side of the fireplace was a free space where a couple of chairs could easily be placed, and where we could talk at our ease.

So we took our places there, and I questioned Madame de Courcelles with my eyes.

The glance with which she responded to mine assured me that I was going to hear a confession.

Seeing that I was a priest of that fair cult which is called Love, I was as fit to discharge the office as another.

“Monsieur de Roquelaure,” the pretty Countess said to me after some hesitation, “you know M. de Brancas ? ”

“He is one of my very good friends.”

“You know that he is away ? ”

“He set out for Rouergue a week ago. They say he will spend five or six weeks there upon business.”

Madame de Courcelles paused and modestly lowered her eyes.

“You also know,” she resumed, blushing ruddily, “or rather you do not know, that M. de Brancas . . .”

“I know nothing,” I replied eagerly ; “but seeing how fair you are, I could not but suspect Brancas, being admitted to your close friendship, of being deeply enamoured of your charms. . . . Was I wrong ? ”

"No, *cher duc*, and as I have determined to be frank, I will avow that I produced that effect upon him. . . ."

"And that he produced the like on you. . . . Is that what you mean?"

"Exactly."

"'Tis an admission, Countess, that I own I would have sooner received for my own address than for another man's."

"Am I to conclude from that that I shall have to repent of my candour?"

"Oh, you could not think such a thing."

She pressed my hand affectionately.

"On what point do you seek my advice?" I resumed after a long silence. "Do you doubt the fidelity of Brancas? Are you going to charge me with some message for him?"

"That is not what I have to speak to you about," said Madame de Courcelles. "It concerns my husband."

"Has he found out anything?"

"No."

"He does not even suspect?"

"Not even that."

"But his jealousy disquiets you?"

"His jealousy . . .!"

She stopped as if what she had to say embarrassed her. But soon she resumed:

"Would to Heaven he were still jealous as he was

a year ago ! Then I should at least still have some hope, while now . . .”

She stopped again.

The puzzle was growing more and more difficult.

“Come, dear Countess, leave me no longer in uncertainty . . . I am burning to know. . . .”

“Well, then, I must tell you, dear Monsieur de Roquelaure, that about a year ago, after a terrible quarrel arising out of jealousy, M. de Courcelles-Marguenat resolved to be no longer my husband . . . except in name. We have separate rooms, separate beds, our lives are quite separate. In a word, we are no longer married. You would not think it to see the fêtes which he continues to give in this house ; and yet it is the truth pure and simple.”

“I do not see why all this should annoy you,” I replied with all the simplicity imaginable, “for Courcelles, though he is a very worthy fellow, passes for a melancholy kind of man in conjugal matters, and I think too highly of you to suppose you enamoured of him.”

“No ; so it is not that which oppresses me.”

“It is something else ?”

“It is that . . . and it is not that.”

“Ah, if you mean to speak parables !”

“How ? You do not follow.”

“No, egad.”

“Well . . . I am *enceinte* . . . and M. de Courcelles, if he be not mad, will give the child neither his name nor his wealth.”

I let slip an exclamation which I at once repressed.

"The deuce, the deuce!" said I, shaking my head, "'tis grave."

"So grave," replied the Countess, "that if I do not find a way to deliver myself from the embarrassment, I mean to drown myself."

"Come, come, no such words as those! That is the kind of remedy that sets nothing right. And what is needed to deliver you? A very little thing!"

"A very little thing!"

"Assuredly."

"Explain."

"All that is needed is that Courcelles should sleep with you just once!"

The poor countess was all confusion. She looked down and said:

"That is just what cannot be."

"We shall see."

"What, you think . . ."

"I do not think anything. But I know the cause of your sadness. I have my notion; it may be bad or it may be good. We will not decide anything in advance; but we will join the dance."

I drew the fair penitent into the midst of the throng.

The dancers were beginning to grow weary, and loud voices were to be heard asking about supper.

"To supper! to supper!" cried some fifty all at once.

Courcelles, who seemed in a merry humour, ordered supper to be served, and five minutes later we were at table. Our host had provided in a grand and princely style, and the supper was magnificent. But it was here as it ever is at those repasts which are given in the middle of a fête, where there is a great assembly, there was much more talking than eating, and much more laughter than drinking. I took my place beside Courcelles, and contrived that he should eat and drink even less than the others. I kept him in conversation about two or three *liaisons* that I knew he had had, the memory of which, as I was aware, was calculated to flatter his vanity particularly. He was highly pleased to meet me again, and was delighted to listen to me. I took advantage of the state of mind in which he was to say to him :

“ You see, my dear Count, that your guests are rising from table already, and we have scarce wetted our lips. If you will take my advice, we will return with the rest to the salons, we will just dance a pavane, and then . . . ”

“ And then ? ” said Courcelles.

“ We will fall to supping afresh.”

“ An excellent idea ! ”

“ Like all of mine.”

At this moment everybody was leaving the table, and we did like everybody else. The Comtesse de Courcelles had heard what I had proposed to her husband, but as yet she understood nothing of what it meant.

The pleasure-seekers were growing tired, and before long the house was empty. De Piennes and De Saulx were anxious to take me off with them, but I answered that I had to talk business with De Courcelles, and at last they left me to myself.

When no one remained but Courcelles, his wife, and myself, I cried :

“Come, *mes amis*, my throat is dry. If you have any compassion for me, we shall all go back to table.”

“But did you not sup just now?” the Countess asked me simply.

“No better than you, dear child, and you were fulfilling your duties as hostess so well that you scarce took a mouthful ; and your husband fared the same, for we chattered so that I am dying of thirst as the consequence.”

Then, by a stealthy pressure of the hand, I made the countess understand that she must refrain from all inopportune remarks.

She took my meaning admirably, and made no further observation.

“Suppose we have a little table laid in your bedroom,” I said to Courcelles ; “this room is like the hall of an old country mansion . . . it suggests too much solemnity. What say you ?”

“In my bedroom be it.”

And he gave orders that my fancy should be gratified.

Courcelles had in fact not supped at all. I had

taken care of that, for I had talked to him without giving him the slightest respite, and had obliged him to reply to every one of my questions.

So he was glad enough to sit to supper again.

"Now then, Germain! Now then, Picard! Now then, Bourguignon!" he cried. "Champagne here, as if it rained champagne. Roquelaure is man enough to empty a cellar . . . I mean by hospitality to outdo his thirst."

The fresh repast was served in a few minutes. I took care that the table chosen should be a very small one, so that we were no distance apart. Courcelles was in the mood to be merry, and needed no tickling to make him laugh. The countess, on her side, added some sparks to the fuel, and very soon the fire took in the worthy husband's mind; I pledged him some ten times in every quarter of an hour without his observing that my glass was always full because it was never emptied. For obviously I had need of all my self-possession.

"My dear Courcelles, 'tis an age since I saw you."

"Why, 'tis a century, my good friend, a whole century. Where the devil were you stowed away?"

"Nay, you might blush if I told you where I was stowed away. But I may tell you that for some days past I have been in love."

"In love!"

"Yes, in love."

"You, Roquelaure!"

"Myself, in person."

"Come, now!"

"Nay, there are no come-nows about it."

"'Tis serious?"

"Aye, mournfully so."

"And with whom are you in love?"

"With an accomplished lady."

"Oh, that's always the way. I have no more champagne. Pour out for me."

"Drink, then, as you will, but no attacks on my goddess."

"Is she a nymph of the opera?"

"Much! Why, she goes to court."

"That would prove nothing."

"Come . . . be mellow as you will, I allow you that, Courcelles; but never be impertinent."

"I will cease being impertinent, but only to satisfy my curiosity. Make me a portrait of her you love."

"Oh, *mon ami*," said the Countess, "you are inciting M. de Roquelaure to talk ribaldry."

"Be reassured, Countess, I shall make a crayon sketch, and not a statue in the style of the ancients. Besides, for the sketch I have to make it is necessary you should be here."

Courcelles stretched out his glass, and I filled it to the brim.

"Here is the portrait you ask of me," I cried.
"She whom I love, my dear Courcelles, is a little elf

for grace, kindness, and wit. Her eyes are bright, her nose is aquiline, her lips are scarlet, and she has the admirable hair of your wife here present. If I did not know all about her family I should think they were sisters."

"How?" said Courcelles, whose tongue was embarrassed already. "Is your choice like my wife?"

"Do you think she would be the worse for that?"

"On the contrary, I congratulate you the more."

And Courcelles sought to embrace me, for he was very soft-hearted when in liquor, but he stumbled between me and the table and embraced his wife instead.

She withdrew a little from him, and I resumed warmly:

"My dear Courcelles, you must drink to the prosperity of my amour."

"Of course I will. Open that other bottle of champagne. It shall be the crowning bumper."

We drank, and this time I bravely emptied my glass to the last drop. But on a sudden, raising my handkerchief to my forehead as if to wipe it, I staggered and turned pale. Courcelles rushed towards me and asked his wife for salts, which he made me sniff.

I stretched out my arms and twice passed through a convulsion.

"It is a stroke," said the Countess.

"He has drunk too much," murmured Courcelles.

At last I opened my eyes again.

"*Mes amis*," said I to the count and countess, looking at them in turn, "I am grieved indeed that this should happen, but 'tis the truth that I feel ill. I should like to lie down."

"Is your coach below?" Courcelles asked me.

"Alas! no, and that is what vexes me, for I shall be compelled to beg your hospitality for the rest of the night."

"That is no matter, my dear friend, you shall sleep . . ."

"Where?"

"The deuce! I have no very fitting room here to offer you. As for a bed . . ."

"Did not I see one in the room where they were at cards just now?" I stammered feebly.

"Yes . . . but . . ."

"But what?"

"It is . . ."

"It is . . . what?"

"It is my bed."

"Well, then . . . this one?"

"This is my wife's."

"You have not another?"

"No."

"What does it matter?" said the Countess. "M. de Roquelaure is too ill to go away in the state in which he now is. I will give up my bed to him, and I will sleep on this sofa."

"Rather than let you sleep on a sofa," I cried, with noble indignation, "I will escape by the roof. Come, come, I will withdraw."

And I took a few steps unsteadily.

"Why, it will be the end of you," cried Courcelles; "you are as mellow as a tun of Malvoisie! You must stay here; I will sleep on the sofa."

"No such thing; I will put no one about. I will go."

"I will not allow it," said Courcelles, swallowing a last bumper of champagne.

"I beg you to stay," murmured the Countess.

"Well," I said after a moment's reflection, "I will stay . . . but upon one condition."

"What is that?"

"That I can be quite sure I do not inconvenience you, and that neither of you shall sit up through the night. Get both of you into this bed, and when I am quite sure of that, I will take possession of the other."

Courcelles hesitated. He cast a glance upon his wife, which she only answered from the corners of her eyes. However, it was evident that he was vacillating.

"Does the arrangement suit you?" Courcelles asked of his wife.

"I shall do what you bid me, sir," she answered, lowering her eyes.

A final stroke destroyed the last of the worthy Courcelles' doubts.

"Come with me," he said to me; "I will show you to your room."

"No, no; I can find my way there alone. Get you to bed first, and then I will leave you."

Courcelles was past resistance. The wine was dancing in his brain, and I saw that he was eyeing his wife fierily.

I pretended to fall asleep in my chair.

Thereupon Courcelles, whose feelings had the complete mastery of him, kissed his wife's shoulders very ardently.

"Oh, monsieur!" she said to him, "what are you doing? It is long since there was anything of that kind."

Courcelles replied to this conjugal reproach by certain gallantries which I could not catch. Then, drawing his wife behind the curtains, he begged her to undress, which she did graciously enough, while she nevertheless resisted that forwardness in him which must have seemed very singular to her.

A moment afterwards silence reigned in the room. And yet at intervals a very sharp ear might have distinguished, without great trouble, a murmuring interlarded with broken words, the sound of a few kisses, and some regular creakings, whereof I think it superfluous to describe the character. They might have been thought human complaints and lamentations, but in reality it was only the outcry of the bed.

When I was quite assured that my stratagem had succeeded, I went to seek sleep, but a thousand in-

describable thoughts persisted in banishing it from my eyelids.

Until broad daylight I could but dream of the lovable Comtesse de Courcelles-Marguenat.

On the following day I paid her a visit. She was alone, and threw her arms round my neck.

Everything had passed to perfection.

There was no further need for anxiety about Brancas' child, for it now had a father.

No one could prove gratitude better than Madame de Courcelles-Marguenat proved it to me. Her mind was relieved of all anxiety, she was at peace about her husband, and Brancas was absent.

These circumstances suggested a very natural thought to the pretty countess, namely, that she should recompense me for the service which my good star had allowed me to render her.

Nought remained but to discover the recompense.

"Seek it yourself," she said to me.

"If I dared to speak," I answered, "I should ask too much . . . so I prefer to be silent."

"Nay, but ask," she made reply, and she blushed, "then we can see."

"On further thought," I resumed after a pause, "what I desire is never asked for."

"Then . . . take it."

Madame de Courcelles shut her eyes and opened wide her arms to me. I have nothing to add but that Courcelles returned a quarter of an hour later. It was rather soon . . . but we took our revenge the following day and the days that followed.

CHAPTER LI

I go on my travels—The Lake of Como—The hostelry—Aspects—The two little musicians—Brother and sister—On the lake—The boatman—Enchanted banks—The Pliniana—A girl from the mountains—The village fête—Manuelo and Mélina—The betrothed—A tender conversation—Platonic love—Mélina and Italy.

BEFORE M. de Créqui was sent as ambassador to Rome, I was ordered thither to fulfil the duties of envoy extraordinary for the period of a month or two.

I had never seen Italy, and this order gave me the liveliest pleasure. I did not defer the start.

The delight with which I had looked forward to this journey had not so perfect a fulfilment as I had hoped. I was indisposed throughout the journey.

I know not whether I owed this sickliness to the quality of the climate or some other cause, more or less immediate, but this much is certain, that my head was always heavy and in pain, and that I felt no better until I had arrived at the Lake of Como.

The Lake of Como is admirable. What an aspect! What a scene! What an incredible accumulation of supreme beauty and lavished charms, as in those marvellous gardens of which mythology tells us!

I had traversed one part of Switzerland, and my head was still full of the sublime vistas which nature has so bountifully spread here. It is scarce possible to imagine the contrast between the two kinds of places, for their character is entirely different.

In Switzerland I had been delighted to contemplate the vast glaciers whose summits pierce the heavens, the high mountains covered with ancient pines, the torrents which fall with a noise of thunder, the ever-varying roads, the bottomless precipices, all the majestic scene which, while it is the result of chance, nevertheless displays the hand of God.

Italy offered me quite different and quite fresh landscapes.

Here it was no longer savage nature and wild upheaval, but sweet and smiling aspects befitting some kind of Moslem paradise, wherein was only wanting, to complete the resemblance, a magnificent legion of houris.

I was in great haste. The orders I carried forbade all delay, my instructions were clear, and yet . . . yet I could not resist my desire to stay awhile at the Lake of Como.

Imagine a sheet of blue water fourteen to fifteen leagues long by about two wide, surrounded by the fairest zone that vegetation has ever given to a known place in the world. Thousands of orange-trees and oleanders cover the margin of this exquisite lake on all sides, and the perfumes that arise from them are

sufficient to lull the most exacting sultan into dreams. When I first beheld the lake, the setting sun was descending to the horizon and gilding the tranquil waters. No human words can convey such a scene. All was calm, peaceful, almost slumberous. Naught was to be heard but the songs of the birds, bidding their evening farewell to this glorious and peaceful nature. There is something sacred in impressions such as these.

I had the good luck to choose a hostelry whence I saw this radiant and imposing scene in every detail. Although I am but little disposed by nature to dreamy pleasures, I passed the greater part of the evening alone, leaning upon the balcony of a wooden terrace, the pillars of which were bathed by the waters of the lake. Thence I regarded the scene at once mute and eloquent which was spread before me, and without any exaggeration I may say that my whole life at the time was concentrated in my eyes.

I made a poor supper, not because my host's cookery was bad, but because I was too much taken up with the natural beauties that everywhere grew beneath my gaze. I had a place in a kind of amphitheatre, and every moment I found fresh points, worthier each one than the last of my undivided attention. The Rhoetian Alps especially, with their varied and picturesque conformation, form one of those delightful groupings which are destined to evade the skill of the cleverest painter.

About nine o'clock I bade my host bring me—I was still upon the terrace—a jug of iced lemonade, which he had boasted of to me as a perfect refreshment. There was no deceit in it, for the drink was excellent, and I sipped it slowly, while from my coign of vantage I watched the fresh effects introduced into the scene by the advance of night, which, after growing deeper and deeper, began to be blanched by the trembling rays of the rising moon.

At this moment I was ravished to an ecstasy for which I was unprepared, and its unexpectedness rendered it the more agreeable and the sweeter. . . .

Melodious accents were wafted by the breezes.

I turned round.

A charming little girl, of about thirteen or fourteen, but seeming more developed than the girls of northern countries are commonly at that age, was singing while she accompanied herself on a mandoline of a truly delightful tone. Near her was a young lad of some sixteen years, who completed the harmony with a bass voice which a paid singer would certainly have envied. I took care not to interrupt them, but hastened, on the contrary, on seeing that they stepped backward at sight of me, to reassure them and tell them by a gesture that I wished them to continue.

They understood my wish, and sang me five or six songs in the same manner without stopping.

These human voices, falling in the wide space and

in the twilight darkness, so that it was as if in a desert, produced a magical effect, the nature of which it would be difficult to convey exactly. One moment I thought I was dreaming ; but I was deprived of that illusion by the girl, who came up to me, and, dropping me a curtsy, asked me if I was pleased.

The word was too weak.

The fact was that I was blissful, enchanted, ravished !

I pulled a gold piece from my pocket and handed it to the pretty artist who had given me such genuine delight.

"Oh, signor !" she said, "what are you giving me ?"

"A modest reward to encourage your excellent talent, my child."

"Oh, take it back, signor, take it back !" said she, giving the gold into my hand again.

"But why refuse it ?"

The girl blushed and lost her readiness of speech. The youth took up the thread.

"Signor," said he, "my sister does not refuse what your generosity allows her . . . but we are children of a worthy mountaineer who tills the soil and lives by his work. . . . He told us to go and earn our bread, and we are doing as he said . . . but . . . we do not accept alms."

This pride in my two little musicians both surprised and delighted me.

I gave the girl a coin, which she accepted with a pretty little smile. Then I turned to her brother and said :

“ My friend, when is your sister’s birthday ? ”

“ About the Feast of the Assumption, sir.”

“ Is it the fashion in this country to give presents on birthdays ? ”

“ Oh, yes, signor ! Last year I gave Pepita the gold cross that you see hanging at her neck.”

“ Well, this year, *mon ami*, you will buy for Pepita the piece of jewellery that she likes best with this gold coin. All I ask of you is that you shall both remember me that day.”

The brother and sister thanked me effusively and retired all confusion.

When they came to the bottom of the hill on which my hostelry was, so to say, perched, they recommenced the duet which had caused me so much pleasure a little time before.

It was their farewell, and I reciprocated it from the bottom of my heart.

I was tired, and I slept excellently ; and when I awoke, about dawn, I felt quite ready to make an excursion, which a traveller can hardly forego, even if his minutes are, like mine, counted.

I mean a visit to the principal places on the banks of the lake.

A little after sunrise I was asked for by the master of a boat who desired to take me upon this

almost compulsory excursion, and to be my guide. I eagerly accepted his offer, and embarked in beautiful weather. He told me that he was taking me to Gravédona. Never had I seen water so limpid and so blue as in this lovely lake. The oars scarcely disturbed it when they were dipped in it, and I felt great pleasure in gliding so easily over the level surface.

When Gravédona came in sight I was possessed of a sentiment of profound admiration. How fair and impressive was nature at this place! What verdure! What a wealth of picturesque details! What a rich and abundant vegetation! There are wooded slopes, one above the other, mountains that seem to flee away towards the horizon like frightened giants, country-houses that seem to have been built in the midst of flowers, and, in word, a whole panorama of wonders.

The solitude—for my boatman said no word—was all in favour of the reverie into which I naturally fell in the midst of aspects so beautiful. I was motionless and silent throughout the journey. The admiration which I felt was such as loses nothing by not being forthwith communicated.

When we went ashore, my boatman thought fit to break his silence, that he might take my orders and learn my movements.

“Where does monseigneur intend to go?”

“Where you take me, *mon ami*.”

"Monseigneur's will is the only will."

"No, zounds! I leave myself to you. You know the country, and I have never seen it. 'Tis for you to give me your advice. Whatever you take me to I shall be pleased with—not with my eyes shut, for I am too enchanted to see all that is around us—but without casting the smallest reflection on your judgment."

"Well, monseigneur, now that we are ashore, your lordship can take either of two courses."

"My lordship is listening. Explain yourself. Between the two courses, I shall make choice of that which seems most suitable."

"Monseigneur, a hundred paces from here is an inn, the reputation of which is well deserved, and where excellent fresh fish is to be had, as you may readily understand. Would you have me guide you thither? I guarantee that you would breakfast there in such a way as to be completely satisfied."

"That is the first of your proposals?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Now for the second."

"The second, monseigneur, is very simple. It is to climb the heights you see above you before breakfast, to see the curiosities of the island, and then return to the inn in question. Your repast will but be delayed."

"How long?"

"Two or three hours only."

"Not more?"

"Not more, monseigneur."

"Breakfast is a very excellent and useful thing, especially when travelling, master boatman, but for a Frenchman accustomed to flat land and valleys without trees, and sometimes without water, to visit such a country is even a more important matter. Let us ascend this hill, let us find the views which I am already enjoying in imagination, and we will breakfast when we return."

"As you please, monseigneur; and if you would allow me to say what I think . . ."

"Say on, *mon ami*, say on."

"Well, I think you are doing wisely; for our country is to be seen at its best and most brilliant in the morning. Those who rise late here, monseigneur, willingly surrender the enjoyment of the richest treasures God bestows upon them, and never think, for the most part, of taking their share in them."

After this little sample of philosophy, my guide by a gesture bade me follow him, and we plunged into the depths of the mountains.

We passed about an hour in climbing without looking behind us.

Sometimes, when I seemed disposed to cast a glance backwards, the owner of the boat, without too much apparent purpose, would speak to me or ask me some question, no matter what, so that the

necessity for answering him put me off my purpose.

He had his reasons for acting thus.

When we had ascended seven or eight terraces formed by nature, which resembled gigantic storeys, whence at each gradation a vast stretch of country became visible, my guide stopped, and, stretching forth his hand as if to show me whither I should direct my eyes, he said to me with a simplicity not unmixed with pride:

“Look, monseigneur.”

It was perfectly sublime.

Some fifty promontories jutted into the lake and produced a semblance of innumerable little lakes included in the main sheet of water. On one side immense rocks rose precipitously into the air and seemed to advance their heads proudly to see their reflection in that eternal mirror; on the other side were fine woods, with a crowded growth of lemon and orange trees, which crowned the enchanted margin of this miniature paradise. I remained transfixed with surprise and admiration.

My guide took satisfaction in my surprise, and that I could easily understand; for the worthy mountaineers entertain a love for their country that is rarely to be found among the dwellers on the plains. The aspect of fine natural sites has some clear expression which impresses itself deeply both on the heart and memory; and for this reason the inhabitants of Auvergne, Switzerland, Savoy and the

Pyrenees are much more subject than others to what is commonly called home-sickness.

We went to visit the Pliniana, where is to be seen a famous fountain, of which it is said that Pliny left a most learned description. This fountain certainly offers incentives to a traveller's curiosity; for it is like the sea in miniature. There is an outflow that cannot be seen, and crowds come from all countries to watch the fountain, and at the same time to inspect the palace of the Pliniana, thus named, no doubt, because one of the Plinies at one time stayed there.

As we made our way down again we enjoyed a view of an immense cascade which fell from a height of one hundred and fifty or two hundred feet, and was lost to sight in a delightful grove of olives, which we entered to rest for a few moments. The climate is so mild in all seasons in those countries that even the aloe grows and flowers there.

After this little halt, which vigorous walking and the constant strain of the attention had rendered necessary, my guide led me to the inn.

This was not a bad idea.

For if my eyes were highly delighted, my belly began to cry for mercy and complain of the merely intellectual aliment that I had been taking so copiously since I rose.

This inn had not the wretched and dirty aspect of most of our French hostelries. Situated in a little

hamlet that was buried in foliage, it seemed rather the retreat of some holy man, a lover of meditation and of solitude, than a halting place for travellers.

I entered, and breakfast was served for me. I must do justice to the simple and patriarchal fare. Milk, eggs, fish, and light wine afforded almost all the ingredients of the cookery ; and yet what pleasure I had in sitting to table, with how much satisfaction I ate the simple and simply prepared dishes, which I certainly should not have tolerated at Versailles, but should only have thought them fit for my lackeys ! I think that I have never in my life found a repast so toothsome.

How excellent a seasoning is a good appetite !

About one in the afternoon the heat became so intense and oppressive that I threw myself on the bed to take my siesta. The siesta is a necessity in southern lands, and one's own inclination in those countries where it is ever warm makes one understand the idle habits of the peoples of the East.

Towards evening my guide sought me out and asked me if it was my intention to return immediately or to pass the night at the inn.

I adhered to the plan I had already chosen, so I took the boatman's advice.

" So monseigneur will leave it to me ? "

" Altogether."

" Then, monseigneur, stay. To-night there is a village fête in this little hamlet, and perhaps it might not displease you to be present at it."

"Let us stay. And where does this fête take place?"

"Close at hand, monseigneur, at the foot of the little rise, where you see the trees, and in full view of the lake."

"What is the music I hear?"

"A fife, and hereabouts the girls dance to the sound of it."

"Let us go and see the girls dancing," cried I gaily. "I shall be glad to form an idea of all the kinds of *beauties* that this rich country produces."

It was about a quarter of an hour's walk from the hostelry to the scene of the fête. It had already begun, and I told my guide that I wished to come to a halt at a distance of some paces from these worthy countryfolk, so that I might behold them in all the innocent happiness of their rustic glee.

The place was admirably chosen. It was a green-sward framed by olive-trees, orange-trees, cedars, laurels, roses, vines, jasmine and myrtle, as with a magic border, the varied colours of which vied with the delicious fragrance that was exhaled. But for the dresses I might have thought myself in some earthly paradise.

As I have mentioned the dresses, I will say a word about that worn by the women. Many wore a brown woollen dress, merely caught in about the waist, with a hood upon the head, which gave them a sort of resemblance to monks. I was told that

this costume was attributable to certain vows which had been pronounced long ago, and had since been preserved out of respect for their sacred tradition. As for the young girls, who were no doubt less punctilious on this point, they wore, for the most part, short dresses which fitted close enough to the person, and the bodice often showed outlines that many a *grande dame* would certainly not have disowned. I chiefly remarked the good taste with which they arranged their hair and the apt choice they made of shades of ribbon. Black and red was the style commonly adopted.

The dance in which these worthy children of the mountains were engaged when I approached them closely resembled the farandole of Provence. I seated myself upon a stone bench and began to observe them silently.

I shall readily be believed when I confess that I did not turn my eyes most eagerly upon the lads. And no one will doubt me when I declare that, after making a general review with great care, I gave—in imagination—the famous apple of Paris to one of the charming girls who were frolicking before me.

She was more like a sprite than a woman. Small, thin, and eager, she seemed scarce to touch the ground. Her hand never remained more than a minute in her dancer's, and if it had been allowable to suspect her intentions, I might have supposed the innocent

child of nature was in reality an avowed flirt. She must have been the despair of her lovers. My boatman had left me to get himself a draught of wine, but I now called him, and, pointing out to him the girl of whom I have just spoken, I asked :

“ Do you know that girl ? ”

“ Certainly, monseigneur, she is the daughter of one of the richest farmers of Gravédona ; and, what is more, she is betrothed to me.”

“ Oho ! I congratulate you on it.”

“ Monseigneur thinks her pretty ? ”

“ Oh, yes, as far as I can judge from this distance.”

“ Monseigneur shall see her closer, if he will but allow her to come on my boat with us ; for she has only come here for the fête, and I am to take her back to her father’s.”

“ It seems to me,” said I to the boatman, “ that you scarce have need of my leave, for by your own words I learn that you had undertaken already to carry her to Gravédona.”

“ Pardon, monseigneur, pardon. If you yourself had not commenced the subject, I should not have ventured to address an indiscreet request to you, but should have come across a second time to fetch Mélina. It would simply have been two journeys instead of one.”

“ I will spare you the trouble, my good fellow. . . . By-the-way, what is your name ? ”

“ Manuêlo, monseigneur.”

"Well, Manuëlo, we are agreed on that. We will set out to-morrow with Méline, your fair betrothed."

Manuëlo coloured with pleasure on hearing the adjective I had added to the name of his beloved, and night having now fallen, I returned to the inn.

Early on the following day I made ready for a second and last excursion on the Lake of Como, for I had already dallied overmuch on the way, and my presence was sorely needed at Rome.

I went to the shore, and there perceived Manuëlo busying himself with getting his boat ready; Méline was seated on the slope of the strand, and was looking tenderly at Manuëlo.

The latter, as soon as he saw me, brought his boat to shore. I sprang lightly on board, offered my hand to Méline, and all three found ourselves gliding softly over the blue waters of the lake.

We fell naturally into our respective places.

Méline and I sat on the stern thwart, and Manuëlo was rowing in the bows.

The first half of the journey was calm and monotonous.

Manuëlo, as he bent to the oars, was humming a mountain air in a low voice.

Méline appeared absorbed in her reflections.

I gazed alternately at the girl and at the hills, at the blue mirror of the Lake of Como and at Méline's fresh tints, at the natural and at the human luxuriance of beauty.

In spite of my enthusiasm for the former, perhaps the latter offered me the more forcible attractions.

Thus doubly preoccupied, I yielded to a mechanical prompting, which was no doubt attributable to that habitual inclination which I could not disown without telling a gross lie.

Without thinking, and without the slightest evil design, I took Méline's white hand.

She looked at me from the corners of her eyes, and smiled affectionately at me.

Audacious fellow that I was !

I shivered with delight.

As she did not withdraw her hand, I acted as everybody does in such a case. From simply touching the hand I proceeded to a more perceptible pressure. Méline offered no resistance. A noble lady of the Marais or of Versailles could have done no better.

"You look happy !" I said to her.

"How should I not be so ?" she answered, releasing her hand, without my yet guessing what was in her thoughts. "I am young, I am beloved, and in a week I shall be the wife of him whom I love."

"Ah ! you love Manuëlo a great deal ?"

"How should I not love him ? We were brought up together, we had the same pleasures and the same griefs, the same hopes, and played at the same games. All the happiness we had in the past is now promised in the future. Could we form other wishes or com-

plain of our lot without showing ourselves ungrateful to Providence, which has done so much for us, and and will yet do so much ? ”

“ Those are goodly sentiments,” said I to Mélina ; “ and they are pious sentiments to boot ! But will they always satisfy your heart ? ”

“ How do you mean ? ”

“ Will you never have other desires ? Will you never feel regret ? ”

“ Regret for what ? ”

“ Regret for pleasures which I am sure you guess at, and the absence of which you may some day feel heavily.”

“ I understand you. You mean the pleasures of the town, of luxury and elegance which sometimes mislead and inflame a girl’s fancy.”

“ Are you better protected than others against these temptations of the evil one ? ”

“ Perchance, monseigneur,” replied Mélina with a sweet seriousness. “ Look around you and behold that splendid beauty of nature, the sight of which becomes the chiefest need in life for us people of the mountains. Think how much there is that is holy and religious in the continual contemplation of these exquisite solitudes, and you will perhaps understand that a simple country girl is less subject to sterile longings and senseless regrets than a woman reared in the midst of riches and abundance.”

“ Manuelo is a very happy man,” I said to her, “ to be beloved by you.”

“ He is not in my debt, for I am as happy as he; so we are equal.”

The remainder of our journey was passed in a charming intimacy. Mélina pointed out to me several places which, but for her, I should no doubt have left unnoticed. She had a very picturesque way of describing objects and of expressing their beauty. Her descriptions sometimes added an ineffable charm to the pleasure which my eyes were gleaning.

What purity ! What an angelic charm ! What innocence ! Such were my reflections as I listened to Mélina.

Never had my emotion been deeper. Under the influence of the pure inspirations of the country, for the first time I understood that from the sweet melodies of nature may be drawn the perception of good and of the principles of virtue.

For a long time I was silent.

All that my imagination desired was supplied by the sight of Mélina. Must I admit it ? On that occasion I tasted to the full the delight of platonic love. . . . My sentiment for the pretty village girl was a mixture of brotherly affection and of respect. . . . For the reader who has observed the tendency of my mind, this will no doubt appear very singular.

It is none the less the fact.

I was amorous without desire and amorous without hope.

’Twas a double happiness that I had not known

before in its perfection, and I remember that I have often felt regret for it since.

My excursion on the Lake of Como has indeed remained among my best and most agreeable souvenirs. Mélina's features are graven in my memory with a clear picture of the sites which I admired when I was by her side. For me she personified Italy, and I have often seen her again in my dreams, always radiant with loveliness, always kind, always wrapped in that veil of innocence and purity which so deeply entranced me.

CHAPTER LII

A roundabout way — Rome — My curiosity — Signor Agrippa Lampridi—The Pope and Roquelaure meet—Alexander VII. —His portrait—My colloquy with His Holiness—Absolution —I kiss the Pope's slipper—An amourette—An early visit from Signor Lampridi—Elaborate precautions—Grave revelations about the conduct of a *chargé d'affaires* — Don Juan de Benavidès - Escovera — An impertinence to be punished—My preparations for vengeance—The postchaise —A *négligé* morning toilet—My visit to the church—Friendly salutation with which I favour the Spaniard—An immense scandal — Everything topsy-turvy — I leave Rome — Louis XIV., king of the *Gabachos*, deigns to pardon me — What happened later to the same Pope through an insult offered to the Duc de Créqui.

THE reader will no doubt reproach me for taking a roundabout way on this occasion.

The truth is, that for a man hurrying to accomplish a mission intrusted to him by the greatest king on earth, I took my ease perhaps a little too freely. But my old tendencies were strong in me ; I could never be punctual. Time is a tyrant against whom I have ever rebelled, and I do not understand how anyone can prevent himself, as he walks, from glancing now to the right, now to the left, before him and behind him, even if he have to miss the most important rendezvous as a penalty.

However, I must do myself justice. I made the rest of the journey with very slight deviation from the direct line. I will also add that this manner of travelling was very distasteful to me, and that in the absence of all merry incidents and all romantic circumstances I became extremely wearied.

I had a great desire to see Rome. My curiosity was liberally satisfied. The site of the seven hills which rise in the city, the Capitol, the ruins of the temples of Æsculapius and Janus on the island in the Tiber, those of the temple of Scia, at the foot of the Palatine Hill, filled me with admiration. I made my abode in the Orsini Palace, where I was received by a most amiable host, Signor Agrippa Lampridi, a scion of a noble Roman family, to whom I was doubly recommended, first by my rank of Envoy Extraordinary to the Holy City, and secondly by several letters of introduction signed by the best names in France and dated from Versailles.

I installed myself at Signor Agrippa's house, and he was good enough to take in hand my education as ambassador, and tell me what steps I had to take in my circumstances. My ignorance may, perhaps, cause astonishment, but my political education was not nearly so advanced as my studies of love, and I was born for the life of the streets, and not to handle affairs of State. However, on this occasion I had to make the best of things, and try to live up to a position by which it would have been shameful to seem overwhelmed.

As my arrival had been announced by official despatches, and as I myself brought credentials which were perfectly in order, I had not long to wait for my presentation to the Holy Father.

Was it not like a joke?

The meeting of the Pope and Roquelaure!

A saint hobnobbing with the devil, or water and fire, would offer no greater contrast.

However, I tried to carry it off well, and succeeded passably.

The Sovereign Pontiff at the time was Alexander VII., who was born at Sienna in 1599, and belonged to the illustrious Chigi family. My introducer, to give me an idea of the personage I was about to see, had related to me the principal events of his life. He told me that he had first been nuncio in Germany, then inquisitor at Malta, vice-legate at Ferrara, bishop of Imola, and then had been made a cardinal; he had been elected Pope in 1655, in the room of Innocent X. He was, so I was told, a man of much talent, a clever politician, very scrupulous in what concerned religion and morality, and very well suited to bring the Church back into that straight path from which she had too often strayed.

Although on ascending the pontifical throne he had confirmed the bull of Innocent X., which condemned the five propositions of Jansenius, an act which had not at all pleased the French court, yet the understanding between Versailles and Rome had not been

interrupted for a moment. No doubt there was some coldness between the two courts, but a slight difference about so fine a point as the settlement of a question of faith had not sufficed to change the good relations which subsisted from time immemorial between the head of the Catholic Church and the King of France, *his eldest son*.

On the day when I was to appear before the Pope I experienced a sort of fear or remorse ; I asked myself if it were fitting that I should so closely approach the spiritual father of all Christians. It was evident that I should be obliged, if only as a matter of politeness, to ask His Holiness for the absolution, and in all conscience I did not feel myself what is usually called well prepared.

But I was particularly pleased with the idea of kissing the Pope's slipper, and this I would not have missed for the whole world.

So I got ready for the ceremony, without troubling myself about scruples.

Pope Alexander VII. was not a very old man. It seemed that in his case they had not required, before giving him the tiara, that he should have an altogether ruined digestion and be half-dead. He had been appointed at fifty-six, and was rather over sixty when I saw him.

The cardinals, in giving their votes for him, had, however, not altogether abandoned the tradition which shows that they are very little disposed to accept for

master any sound and healthy fellow. Alexander was not very old, it is true, but he was delicate, and had such a face as makes an impatient heir dream roseate dreams. A good doctor who had examined him carefully would not, perhaps, have given him six months to live. No doubt the doctor would have been out in his reckoning; but, when all is said and done, his error would not have been great, for Clement IX., who was the two hundred and forty-seventh pope, succeeded him in 1667.

My entry into the Vatican would have upset the gravity of my most serious friends if they could but have enjoyed that particularly original spectacle. They had sent me an escort of worthy priests, who no doubt thought they were conducting a saintly man, and did it with all goodwill and in the most serious fashion imaginable. A little more, and they would have had the cross and banner in front of me, as if I had been a precious relic.

I walked slowly, and though I may not have had a sufficiently meditative air, I carried myself with dignity enough to uphold my quality as a gentleman and a Frenchman.

The Pope's reception was altogether gracious. Alexander VII. had an interest in being on good terms with France, and he knew how Louis XIV. wished his envoys to be treated. So he thought he would relieve the meeting of all coldness and insignificance by especially addressing to me certain

questions destined to make me feel how he esteemed my person and the country to which I had the honour to belong.

Upon a sign from His Holiness, his nephew, Cardinal Chigi, who had introduced me, withdrew a little to one side so as to leave us some liberty.

“Monsieur le duc,” said Alexander VII. to me, “you are welcome. France has ever found in the Pontiff of the Church of Rome a true father, and the children of France are my children. May this conviction, graven on all hearts, perpetuate the alliance of the bravest nation in the world with the capital of Christendom !”

Here was a fine and rounded period, and it was too fine for so backward a Catholic as myself ; so that I was gravelled, and in the bare treasury of my lay eloquence I found nothing finely turned enough to make a worthy answer. So I bowed low, so low that I almost touched the ground.

It was as good a way as any other of saying nothing while seeming to express much. This behaviour appeared to be very well received by the Pope, who resumed in tones of much feeling :

“My son, will you not ask me for absolution ?”

I must own that I had forgotten it.

But the venerable Pontiff’s question had come very appropriately to remind me of my duty, and I bowed a second time and said :

“Holy Father, that absolution is the keenest, the

deepest, and chiefest of my desires. But I dared not ask it of you."

"Do you not deserve it, my dear son?"

"It is not for me, a poor unworthy sinner, to decide."

"Christianity is a religion of indulgence and pardon," replied Alexander VII. "The sinner has but to do himself this justice, that one day he will repent, and this suffices to render him worthy of the clemency of Heaven."

"On that ground, Holy Father, I may well be more meritorious than I thought; for it is beyond all question that a time will come when I shall repent."

"That assurance fills me with joy, my dear son. But I have still one or two questions to put to you."

"I am attending, Holy Father."

"Do you practise the chief Christian virtues?"

"If your Holiness will deign to recall them to me.

. . . They are not precisely present to my memory."

"First, faith?"

"Oh, I have always believed . . . blindly."

"Hope?"

"'Tis the mainstay of my life."

"Charity?"

"I practise it as much as I can, and in every form in which I recognise it."

"It does indeed take several forms," said the vicar of Jesus Christ to me, smiling. "We are

charitable in shutting our eyes to the faults of others ; charitable in devoting ourselves ; charitable as the Magdalen, who was pardoned much because she loved much."

"I have some reason to believe, Holy Father, that I am as a man what the Magdalen was as a woman. Will your Holiness, upon this assurance which I give, be so indulgent as to absolve me ? "

"Bow your head, my son ; I give you my blessing." And Pope Alexander VII. extended his hand over my head.

A sort of shiver passed through me.

When I am resolved upon a thing, the idea of it does not leave me for a moment. I wished to kiss the Pope's slipper. I had already got half way. Bowed as I was, the Holy Father's feet were just under my eyes.

It needed but one more effort, and my lips would touch the coveted velvet.

I made a movement, which explained my purpose.

Alexander VII. had the extreme benevolence to favour my pious wish, and the famous kiss was placed in the very midst of the holy slipper.

When I left the Vatican, I was as proud as I had been on the day of my first battle.

Signor Agrippa congratulated me on my presentation, assuring me that it would make some stir in Rome, seeing that the Holy Father had shown himself so gracious and affectionate with me, that few

foreigners could boast of having been received in such a way. He offered to show me the rarest curiosities of the town, and I eagerly accepted. On the following day we commenced our excursions.

One of the things which both excited and satisfied my admiration the most was the temple of the Flavian family, where is the tomb of the Emperor Domitian. How splendidly does it recall the past! How it presents destruction! What memories and what contrasts! On the same day I went to see the temple of Jupiter Tonans, built on the Capitoline Hill, at some distance from the spot where once rose the house of Manlius. We came last of all to the amphitheatre of Titus, where there are very remarkable ruins.

My life at Rome passed at first without incidents worthy of relation. I had five or six subordinates under me who did the main part of the embassy work and reduced my duties within very narrow limits, that is to say, to an almost mechanical affixing of my signature below administrative deeds, the details of which, I own, would have wearied my brains intolerably. It was my great pleasure to go forth in the evening and be seen in the public promenades, where my name and my French title drew the glances of many Roman ladies upon me.

From these rather killing glances arose a little intrigue, the end of which was not of a nature to hurt my feelings; but I will say nothing of it, for the

simple reason that the story would offer nothing new. I then convinced myself that amourettes are alike in all countries on earth, and that at Rome, as at Paris, there are certain diversions which prove conclusively that the human race are brothers in God. Women, of course, are included in this fine philosophic dictum.

But I will hasten to a little event which I have inscribed with some diligence upon the annals of my life, one which gave rise to not a little astonishment in Rome.

Here is the fact.

The door of my room was suddenly pushed open one morning.

I was still in bed, and, so to say, between two sleeps.

By-the-way, that is one of the best times of all that we dedicate to repose. The fair sights which fancy sees at those moments are not to be counted, the past delights which then live again are inexpressible, and the scope of hope is prodigious.

To resume.

As I said, the door of my room was briskly pushed open.

I jumped up in bed, uttering the exclamation that naturally rose to my lips in the circumstance.

“Who is it?”

There was no need of making answer; for I at once perceived my amiable host, Signor Agrippa Lampridi.

"A thousand pardons," said he to me, "for waking you so early, but I have something to tell you."

I had no need of that assurance to accept Signor Lampridi's word, for he had shown the greatest attention to me, and the greatest kindness, and I knew he would not disturb me without good reason.

"Come in, come in," I said to him, opening my curtains; "you know well, signor, that I am always enchanted to see you."

"You are very good."

Signor Lampridi seemed very embarrassed, and as if care oppressed him. He had a cane in his hands, and he was handling the knob of it as if he had been rolling a ball of gum mastic. It was easy to see that he had a speech on the tip of his tongue, and wanted but the first word to make a start.

I questioned him by gesture.

"Monsieur le duc," he said at length, "what I have to narrate is a very delicate matter."

"Oh, oh!"

"Very serious."

"The deuce!"

"And as I think I have noticed that you sometimes have *la tête un peu près du bonnet* . . ."

"Now, for an Italian, that is a very French way of putting it, Signor Agrippa."

"I have been to Paris, monsieur le duc, and when there was acquainted with several of your

friends, MM. de Guise, d'Epernon, d'Humières, and others, who gave me that information about your character of which I have just spoken."

"Well, they did not mislead you."

"I know it, and that is what perturbs me."

"Get to the facts, I pray you, Monsieur Lampridi."

"Here you have them. Have you noticed at the Vatican, not the Spanish ambassador, for he is very ill at present, but the man who is replacing him for the time?"

"A tall thin man?"

"Just so."

"Who was presented next after me on the day of my arrival?"

"The same."

"And he is called, I believe . . ."

"Don Juan de Benavidès-Escovera."

"Oh! he has a crowd of other names . . ."

"Which I will spare you. You know that Spaniards are not niggardly in such matters with their children, and many a ruined hidalgo, who has not ten reals to leave to his heir, will sometimes leave him such a string of appellations, that two or three leaves of the parish register will scarce contain them."

"I will be content this time," I said, smiling, "with those you have just given him. My Spaniard is called Don Juan de Benavidès-Escovera."

"That is it."

"Well, what has this worthy son of Castille done that is so strange and wonderful? I have not seen him for two days, since all yesterday I was laid up with a wretched headache that made me cry for mercy."

"Well, it was yesterday . . . that he was guilty . . ."

"Of what crime, in God's name?"

"If it be not a crime . . . I may well say it was a great piece of audacity."

"Touching what and whom?"

"In point of etiquette, monsieur le duc, and against you."

"If you spoke Hebrew, my dear Monsieur Lampridi, I should understand you just as well."

"I will be more plain."

"'Twill be of service, for I own I see my way no better than a man in the catacombs."

This is what happened.

In spite of this exordium, which promised some immediate results, Signor Lampridi made a considerable pause. He looked around him with the apprehensive air of a man who is about to reveal a great secret and is afraid of being surprised in the act; then he blew his nose to give his words more clearness, and thus commenced the explanation which I was awaiting with so much impatience.

"You know the chapel of the Vatican?"

"As well as a man may who has seen it three times."

"And you remarked the row of stalls?"

"Of course, seeing that I sat in the first seat on the same side as the choir."

"That place, monsieur le duc, was the one assigned to you, was it not?"

"That is the one."

"Two cardinals in person conducted you thither the first time you heard mass in the chapel?"

"Just so."

"And in so honouring the Duc de Roquelaure, they meant not only to confer honour on the illustrious gentleman whose name is known throughout Europe as an irreproachable and stainless seigneur, but also to the King of France, whom you represent?"

"That was how I took it."

"Well, monsieur le duc, an insult as uncalled-for as it was gross has been inflicted on the King of France and on yourself."

"Eh? What do you tell me? But do you know that this begins to be interesting? My dear Monsieur Lampridi, do me the pleasure, I beg you, to sit there, a little nearer to my bed. Tell me again what you have just told me; perhaps I did not understand it rightly. It seems that His Majesty has been insulted, and that my humble personality has not been free from ungentle handling? We must throw light on the affair, and see forthwith if there is no remedy for

the disaster. Control your emotion, I beg you, and let us talk."

"You wish for details?"

"Wish! . . . The more you can give me, the better it will be. If there has been an outrage . . . Who is the author of it?"

"Don Juan de Benavidès-Escovera."

"What, he? with his body as long as a pole and his legs that seem too feeble to carry him, so like are they to spindles! It only needs a match to set that wooden frame on fire. But to come to the facts: in what insolence has the wretched skeleton indulged himself?"

"Yesterday at vespers, monsieur le duc, Señor Don Juan de Benavidès entered the church in great state, escorted as if he had been the Shah of Persia in person. There were six or eight valets around him who opened a passage for him, tapping the floor with big canes and saying, "Place, place for Monseigneur the Envoy of His Catholic Majesty. . . ." And the idlers stood aside to let the haughty Spaniard pass, and scarcely did he deign to acknowledge their deference by a patronising nod."

"I see nothing very serious in that," I interrupted, getting into bed again.

"Wait, monsieur le duc, wait."

"It seems to me that is what I am doing."

"I am coming to the important point. Señor Don Juan de Benavidès-Escovera, having made his

way through the crowd, which was very compact, for a sermon was to be preached by a monk of high repute, took his seat without more ado in the stall that you had occupied each previous day, and which was, obviously, reserved for you, as marking a certain pre-eminence in your favour which, till now, in the reign of Louis XIV., no one thought of disputing with the French ambassador. This being remarked to him, he merely answered: 'Eh! on my soul, what have we to do with this man and his king, who is only king of the *Gabachos*?''

"Ah! ah!" said I, appearing outside the bed-clothes again; "I begin to understand. . . . Is that how he spoke of the King of France?"

"Yes, monsieur le duc, those are his very words; so you see that it is a serious matter."

"Yes, indeed! And not only is it serious, but it may take a very singular turn. Ah! my dear Monsieur Lampridi, how grateful I am to you for coming to tell me all this. I was almost beginning to fear I should grow weary of Rome, and now I see that, if we go to work the right way, the laugh will be all on our side."

"The laugh?"

"Certainly."

"You think it a laughable thing?"

"Not yet. But we will endeavour to make it so."

"Well, ransack my brains as I may, it is impossible for me to think . . ."

"Oh, no doubt, the diverting side of serious events never appears at once. Later, when one cannot help laughing, one recognises the mistake. I will prove to you, my dear friend, that in this world there is comedy in everything. Only I have one little question to ask you."

"I will answer it to the best of my power."

"Will you help me to take revenge on the Spaniard?"

"That I will undertake to do to the utmost of my ability."

"Then, first and foremost, do me a little service."

"Which is?"

"Leave me alone a moment. I must think."

"I will leave you."

"Oh! one word more."

"I am all attention."

"Do you know if Señor Don Juan de Benavidès means to return soon to the church?"

"He will be there this very morning, at high mass. But for that I should not have disturbed you so early."

"In that case there is not a moment to be lost. *Au revoir*, Monsieur Lampridi."

My amiable host withdrew, and I was alone to make the most of my inspirations.

What course was I to take? The circumstances presented a double difficulty, for this reason, that I had to safeguard the dignity of the crown and my

own pride. Further, I felt a scruple. This Monsieur Benavidès was, no doubt, a very presentable hidalgo (I had no mind to dispute that), but he had not all the importance that his pretensions seemed to claim. He was but the substitute, the auxiliary, the stopgap of the ambassador, and I should have demeaned my character if I had shown too much concern over an incident which I ought rather to use to cover my adversary with ridicule. I reflected for long on what I had better do in view of the double interest in my care, to which I have just alluded, and at length, after much hesitation, with many scruples, and when I had closely weighed the pro and the contra, I adhered to the following design.

But instead of explaining my intentions in this place, I had better give a simple narrative of the facts.

As was my custom, I called my man to proceed with the preparations for my toilet.

He drew from the cupboard a fine doublet of green silk, new breeches, my hat with plumes, and my sword with the white sheath.

"Put all that back where you found it," I said to him, checking him as he was busying himself.

"What, monseigneur?"

"Simply give me my dressing-gown and slippers."

"Ah, monseigneur is not going out."

"On the contrary, I am going out at once. Tell them to put the coach to forthwith."

My man obeyed.

It will easily be guessed that my toilet was soon completed. I put on nothing but a pair of drawers, and completed my costume by the inevitable night-cap.

"Will the coach soon be ready?"

"It is in the courtyard, monseigneur."

"Tell Signor Lampridi that I wish to speak to him."

Lampridi came to me at once.

To give an idea of the guffaw that burst from him when he saw me thus attired would be absolutely impossible. It seems that this bedtime *déshabillé* did not show off my person to advantage. I joined in Signor Agrippa's merriment, and then added:

"I asked you whether you would aid me in my plan of vengeance, and you answered yes. Are you still of the same mind?"

"Entirely at your service."

"What I want is not of a nature to compromise you. It is only that you should go and order me post-horses and a chaise, in which my luggage is to be put. I want to find it ready when I leave the church, so that I can start for Paris forthwith."

"But your coach?"

"I leave it for you, and beg you to accept it as a souvenir of our friendship."

Signor Lampridi thanked me with effusion and sincerity.

He set forth instantly to comply with my request, and I got into the coach to go to the church.

It was just the time of mass.

The faithful were flocking thither.

I sent my man to give a glance at the stall, so that I might not be exposed to the risk of a blunder. He soon came and told me that my Spaniard was at his ease in the stall in question.

That information was enough for me.

I jumped lightly from the coach and entered the church.

I leave the reader to guess what a hubbub spread around at the sight of me.

My man was lording it impudently as he sat there, and around him were two or three envoys from distant countries, among whom I think I recognised the ambassadors of Sweden and Russia.

I strode hastily up the nave, without heeding the interjections that greeted my passage.

Mirth had already succeeded to surprise.

People might have supposed it was the carnival.

I was the only one who did not laugh.

Calm and imperturbable, upright as an archbishop preparing to bestow his benediction, I walked up to Señor Don Juan de Benavidès-Escovera.

He had a droll head and a comical body. He was of unusual thinness, and his clothes seemed to float around him as if they had been harassed by puffs of wind.

I know not whether he recognised me. But before he was able to make a movement, before he had time to collect himself, I bowed and rose again ; then, showing everybody one of the slippers with which I had provided myself, I gave him a couple of resounding smacks on each cheek.

He made a horrible grimace.

I acknowledged it by a profound bow, and made my way to the door again.

I heard my name mentioned here and there in the crowd ; then there arose a clamour around the stall. A rapid glance showed me what was the cause of this disturbance. The Spaniard, still stupefied by the courtesy with which I had favoured him, had jumped up in his seat and overturned the oak desks on which the books of " Hours " belonging to his neighbours were lying.

The clergy of the Chapter, receiving the full weight in their backs, were instantly overthrown.

The singers, interrupted in the middle of their anthem, thought for a moment that they had committed some blunder, and that the devil had invaded the church to trounce them for it.

They fled with a loud outcry.

I know not what happened after that. Instead of leaving by the main door by which I had entered, I betook myself to a side exit, which brought me to the spot where the postchaise, got ready by the kind diligence of Signor Agrippa Lampridi, was in waiting.

“At your top speed, driver!”

I was starting for France again.

I beg my readers not to consider this as the flight of a poltroon, but the retreat of a prudent man. There were few Frenchmen at Rome then, and if I had remained there after such an adventure I should both have risked my life and compromised the dignity of the sovereign whom I was appointed to represent.

As I had certain informants in Rome, I soon had intelligence about the farcical scene I had brought about.

Don Juan de Benavidès, to whom it seems my slipper gave a violent toothache, betook himself to the Pontiff's palace, holding his hand to his jaw.

Alexander VII., when he had had the entire story recounted to him, found it very difficult, as may be believed, to keep his countenance, and thought it his duty to soothe the Spaniard, who was breathing fire and fury, by promising him that he should have satisfaction.

However, as the Pope was not able to send an army of two hundred thousand men against France to please M. Benavidès, His Holiness asked for a few days for reflection.

But before his reflections had drawn to a close, I had got to Versailles. The adventure was related to His Majesty in all its details. His Majesty was pleased to laugh heartily over it, and when I asked him what my punishment was to be for so scandalous a sally, Louis XIV. answered me :

"Fear nothing, my poor Roquelaure, you were right to treat this insolent Spaniard as you did, and the king of the *Gabachos* pardons you."

The manner in which the king had taken the affair soon came officially to the ears of His Holiness, and as I had already executed a kind of sentence upon myself by voluntarily leaving Rome, matters went no further.

One of the great regrets of my life is that I have never since had the opportunity of seeing Don Juan de Benavidès-Escovera. I could not have refrained from laughing in his face, and no doubt we should have terminated our quarrel in a manner more worthy of gentlemen that respect one another. From another point of view, it is perhaps better that the matter stopped where it did. A sword-thrust would have changed the farce into a tragedy, and whatever had been the result of a meeting between us, the honour of my slipper would certainly have suffered. So all was for the best.

From that time a certain coldness prevailed between the court of the Vatican and the court of France. Upon his accession, Alexander VII. had set the Parlement and the Sorbonne against him, by confirming the bull of Innocent X., which condemned the five propositions of Jansenius. Some years later, the Duc de Créqui being ambassador at Rome, and he being subjected to an insult by the Corsican Guard, the rupture became open and avowed.

Alexander VII. had no interest in making bad blood with us, and he was extremely mortified at this new difficulty. He instituted a long correspondence with Louis XIV.'s ministers, which failed of effect. At last, being at the end of his resources, and not knowing where to turn, His Holiness sent his nephew Cardinal Chigi to Paris, whose mission, without any pretence of hairsplitting, was to offer humble *excuses* to the king.

Louis XIV. listened benevolently to the cardinal's statement; he even encouraged him to give the explanation by a cordial reception, and thus let him guess at some prompt and easy arrangement. But when the matter was to be concluded, it appeared that His Majesty's goodwill was mere politeness, and that the sovereign's firmness would not yield to any respect of persons.

The insult to Créqui had been public.

The king decided that the amends should be equally public.

The cardinal having replied that he was charged with full powers by his uncle the Pope, and that he would acquiesce beforehand in all that might be required, Louis XIV. dictated his conditions.

In dealing with foreigners, this was always the king's method.

The conditions were these :

The Corsican Guard should be disbanded.

In front of their quarters a pyramid should be

constructed on which an inscription should appear designed to perpetuate the memory of the outrage and of the reparation exacted.

The Pope should restore Avignon and his Mark of Venaissin to France.

All was agreed to.

The king, after exacting these terms, dismissed Cardinal Chigi with splendid gifts. This is what is called gilding the pill.

It is quite possible that, as these arrangements were altogether political, the affair of M. de Créqui was alone considered, but I should not be surprised if, in exacting such a severe reparation, the king was good enough to remember that I too had been grievously insulted, and that if the slipper of a mere gentleman had begun the work of punishment, it rested with the royal sceptre to complete it.

CHAPTER LIII

Underhand schemes of my enemies—A kind of disfavour into which I fall—Men of wit are troublesome to fools—A conversation between Créqui and me—I am exiled to Spain—I soon make a decision—My journey to Perpignan—Madame de Figuières—Two reputations confronted—A quaint idea—My letter to Madame de Figuières—Her answer—I leave Perpignan in bad spirits—I pass the frontier—Gironne—From Mataro to Barcelona—My new valet—The hostelry of Master Nunez—His brother Valentio and his niece Maria—My introduction to Valentio's house—A worthy family—Harmless fun in the evening—Portraits of an engaged couple—My friendship with Antonio Carral—The explanation of my virtue.

THE manœuvres of my enemies could not fail, if they endured long enough, to produce some unfortunate result. In spite of the affection that His Majesty felt for me, he was at length wrought upon by the outcry of MM. de Saint-Simon and other envious folk who could not bear to be equalled or surpassed by a rival whom they affected to call *the wit*, as if there were something in the name annoying or humiliating to me. I received privately a well-meant piece of advice that I should leave Versailles, and I learned from trusty friends that King Louis XIV. had, in fact, spoken about me in terms that could hardly be misunderstood.

I was deeply mortified, I own, at the way my fortune now turned. After the many services I had rendered to the State, I thought I could never incur the king's displeasure to the extent of being turned from the court, and I felt convinced that intrigues and treachery, attributable to certain jealous courtiers, had a greater part in my disfavour than those faults or misdeeds the nature of which I scarcely knew.

What crime had I committed ?

To what was my disgrace due ?

Was it my levity ?

Or was it rather what my too kindly friends were pleased to call my wit ?

In truth I should have found it very hard to say, but this much is certain, that my levity and wit—since wit is talked of—had wounded or annoyed many influential personages, and the defeated were certain to take some kind of revenge sooner or later. So, to remove me from the theatre of my exploits, they contrived for me an embassy to Spain, which was offered to me in such terms as made refusal impossible. I remained for two days in complete ignorance of the real causes which had brought about the exhibition of severity whereof I was the victim ; but as I was busying myself with preparations for departure, M. de Créqui, whose friendship for me had never shown signs of faltering, came to me in my cabinet. His friendship for me was the more remarkable because certain malicious wits had tried to bring on a quarrel between

us by saying that I had got Madame de Lesdiguières with child, whereby he was deprived of the Duc de Lesdiguières' succession and estate.

"Well," said he to me, "you are going?"

"I am obliged to go; for I am forced into it."

"You are right to do it graciously," continued Créquì, "for the king is dissatisfied with you."

"The king! But do they in fairness say what my crime is?"

"No; but so many husbands deceived, so many brothers angered, so many lovers supplanted, have all carried their complaints to high quarters, that His Majesty, being wearied by so much outcry . . . has decided . . . to exile you."

"Ah! so 'tis in sober earnest exile?"

"It will not be so called; but the king, who has just appointed me ambassador to Rome, has sent me to you, my dear Roquelaure, to bid you withdraw as soon as may be, and not return to France without express orders. I will give you the king's exact words, for he told me to repeat them to you accurately:

"Tell Roquelaure that I exile him to Spain, and that I shall consider disobedience as high treason."

"To Spain," I murmured, bowing my head. "The deuce! The deuce! It is a long journey—and I am to remain there till further orders! That may mean a long time. I would sooner be in your place, my dear Créquì, and return to Rome with a real mission. It would flatter my self-esteem a great deal more, and vex me a great deal less."

"You must put up with it," said Créqui. "King Louis XIV. is not the man to repeat a thing twice."

"You are right, the one message must suffice me. Farewell, my dear Créqui. I shall pass the time reflecting on the king's command and on my own offences. Who can say? Perchance this penance on Spanish soil, as His Majesty says, may be the means of winning me paradise, and in that case I shall not have lost either my trouble or my time. . . . Farewell, Créqui, and if time drags too heavily, I shall make myself into a monk."

I was very gay when I set out. Créqui looked at me with compassion.

He thought I was mad.

But I had made up my mind. A journey had always had attractions for me, and I was not sorry to experience a change of climate and surroundings. Besides, some subtle instinct assured me that beyond the Pyrenees there awaited me certain sweet hours of pleasure and forgetfulness.

I took with me all the money I had available and started.

As I passed through Perpignan, on my way to Spain, I thought to avail myself of the forty-eight hours I was allowed to stay there for a very original purpose, and this is the occupation I had devised for my time.

From this instance may be seen how far fatuity such as is natural to the human mind may carry a man, and especially a Roquelaure. The story is not

at all to my own advantage, but in my view memoirs are valueless if they do not contain confessions; and in this case truth is my sole guide, and I shall not depart from it for a single instant. This is the fact:

There was well known at Perpignan at that time a certain Madame de Figùères, celebrated as both the prettiest and the most learned woman of the place, and consequently she was more in vogue just then than any other. She was a charming brunette, they said, more Spanish than French, and her eyes, destructive as guerillas, made innumerable and incessant ravages in the best society of the town. Her triumphs and her victims were to be heard of everywhere. Further, those chronicles which proclaimed her excellences were not dumb about her weaknesses, and it was asserted that, taking advantage of her widowhood, which assured to her uncontrolled freedom, she had more than once gratified certain caprices, which could quite easily be explained, without overmuch formality. Everyone agreed in praising the good taste which her choices had shown.

As I have said above, I had but a little time to spend at Perpignan, and I confess that the tales with which my curiosity about the fair dame of Roussillon had been fed had inflamed me to the highest point.

I thought I owed it to myself and to the name of Roquelaure, as well as to my established reputation, not to pass through such a town as Perpignan, where so famous a beauty as Madame de Figùères was to

be found, without leaving some signs of my attentions. . . .

I had but a few hours before me . . . so I had to take the shortest way and do the utmost in the briefest time.

I thought I would prepare my path with the fair one by one of those fervent, ardent, inflaming letters which, like thunderbolts, beat down the doors of the best-guarded heart and carry in a burning flood like the lava of a volcano.

I cut my quill, invoked to my side all the pagan deities which preside over love, and delivered myself of the following masterpiece :

“MADAME,—At the moment when I am to pass the frontier, armed with the authority of our illustrious and well-beloved King Louis XIV., I am detained by the melodious sounds of unnumbered sirens, of whom some command, some beg me to stay a moment and deign to look behind me. I give ear to them; I listen to their message . . . and I clearly discern at length that these voices speak to me of you.

“Hastening in the service of His Majesty, I ought to resist this seductive appeal and boldly hold on my way . . . but for this I have not the courage. Though I know you not, I love you. Your mere renown is one of those invisible goddesses that I must adore, even against my will.

“Tell me, therefore, fair lady, if you consent to my seeking your company this evening and addressing my farewell to you? If you feel not for me a noble sentiment of humane pity, at least take thought of my fame and reflect that Roquelaure's reputation would be ruined if it could be said of him that he had passed through the

good town of Perpignan, where lived the most accomplished lady in the kingdom, without staying his steps there and offering the tribute of his love, though but for a day or for an hour, to the brightest marvel the earth has ever seen."

And the flourishes of my signature crowned this rare piece of work.

It would seem that the fair lady was ready in her answers, for a few minutes after my messenger had made his way to her, I received the reply which here follows :

"MONSIEUR LE DUC,—I cannot enter into rivalry with the great King Louis XIV., and should desperately regret to put my interests in the balance with those of so illustrious a kingdom as that which you will worthily represent in Spain.

"I should conceive it as no less than a political crime to detain so hurried a gentleman as you at the moment when he is about to cross the frontier on such an important mission.

"Therefore, do not come to see me, monsieur le duc. Pity is scarcely the quality for which I am famed, and as you speak to me, on your side, of fame to be safeguarded, permit me to speak shortly of my own, which a visit from you, if I authorised it in the present circumstances, would very gravely compromise.

"You tell me (and I know) that at Perpignan I have a reputation for good taste which no one contests. . . .

"I am concerned to preserve that reputation intact.

"Well, upon my reputation for beauty you seek to be acquainted with me. Upon your reputation for ugliness, monsieur le duc, I keenly desire not to see you.

"In this way our several renowns will observe a prudent reserve towards each other, and will have no possible complaints to make."

I might have presented myself to this charming rebel to try to prove to her that she was wrong, and that the reputation for ugliness which had been conferred upon me was not so well founded as she might suppose. But I was stung in so sensitive a fibre that I there and then abandoned my enterprise, which, after all, had no more important motive than a most trifling caprice. Be that as it may, my departure from Perpignan may be accounted a real defeat.

Half an hour after I had received the answer of Madame de Figuières, I and my retinue were at the Port Saint-Martin, which is also called the Spanish Gate, and I said farewell, with some disappointment, to the town which had received me so ill.

Happily, for in this life one's days have the good sense to follow on without too monotonous a likeness, I was destined to find abundant recompense within a few leagues.

I passed through Gironne without any experiences which are worthy of a place in these *Mémoires*. Great was my satisfaction at entering a country where it was asserted that the women understood love better than in any other part of the world, and I must own, in the interests of truth, that I did indeed observe a most expressive fire in the eyes of the first señoras whom I met. Among other things, I had the great delight of being shaved by a very taking woman, who, they said, had learned the barber's trade from her husband.

As I passed by Mataro I was much surprised by the contrast that appeared between the sexes. The men, who are nearly all fishers, were coarse and dirty, and a brutal sort of fellows, but all the petticoat sex was notable for an air of amiability and a seductive gentleness. This circumstance I took to be an excellent augury.

I only stayed at Mataro to breakfast and take a turn upon the sea-beach. The water was perfectly calm and as blue as lapis lazuli.

The road from Mataro to Barcelona is delightful. From time to time are to be seen graceful sails skimming over the waves, and the route is bordered continuously by a hedge of mulberries and locust-beans, the exhalations from which communicate a kind of intoxicating perfume to the air.

During this part of the journey I enjoyed the view of one of the fairest regions which I am able to remember.

My body-servant himself, a new fellow whom I had, in fact, taken from the humblest quarter of the good town of Lectoure, gave way, at each change of view, to the ecstasies of a simple admiration which amused me vastly.

This valet, I may say in passing, was an honest fellow, though he had a quick wit. The word "though" is not a jest. It was suggested to me by the bad impression left upon me by my two old servants, Cascarel and Bruscombille, who were quick-

witted enough, but used their wits in ways little likely to secure them a place in Paradise.

This man was called Bertaut.

I arrived at Barcelona in the best humour in the world, and, being curious to make observation of a country which was entirely unknown to me, I first had my luggage and effects deposited in a modest inn, where I left Bertaut, that I might feel myself the freer, and then I installed myself in a hostelry of a very goodly appearance, and this, I may say in passing, is a rare thing in Spain.

It would be difficult to have better luck than I had in the choice of this inn. The master of the house was a very original person, who was eager to see what pleasures he could secure for his customers, and he seemed to divine from the first that I was a man from whom he could reap a handsome profit if I were pleased with the accommodation. He began by telling me that he was called Gonzalo Nunez, that his father was a worthy muleteer who had prospered in his rank of life, and that if it was my intention to spend a week or two under his roof, he would do his utmost to furnish me with all the conveniences that might be to my taste. No doubt in order to prove to me that his offer was not mere empty words, and that he could follow up his proposal promptly with its effects, he asked me if I should like to visit with him the eighty-two churches and forty-five monasteries which embellish the town.

As this little amusement did not attract me sufficiently, he advised me to walk no further than to see some fine vistas which could be surveyed from the Place Saint-Michel, where at the same time I could buy a good box of razors, the best, as they say, and the sharpest to be had in all Europe.

I thanked Nunez for his offers of service, and assured him that I liked to walk alone.

"As you wish," he answered in his Catalan dialect, which appeared to me to bear a great resemblance to our *patois* of Provence.

My installation gave Nunez an occasion for displaying all his zeal. He allotted me a room whence I looked out upon a very fine garden, where, at the moment I put my nose to the window, five or six girls, of whom the eldest was not more than seventeen, were laughing and dancing.

"Who are those pretty señoras?" I asked of Nunez.

"You are very kind, monseigneur," said he to me, "to find anything to praise in them. The eldest of them is my niece, and she is to be married in a week. The betrothal breakfast took place this morning, and she is taking her pleasure with her little friends."

"If the man is equal to the girl, they will make a pretty couple, master posadero."

"Perchance I should seem bold," he replied, "if I proposed that your excellency should make acquaintance with my brother Valentio, who is this

pretty child's father. Then you would see her close, and I assure you she is worth the trouble; but, in truth, I dare not."

"You may take courage, Nunez, you may take courage. 'Tis in my nature to be a great observer, but my sight does not carry very far. That is as much as to tell you that I am in favour of whatever shortens distances."

"Well, Señor Français," said Nunez, "I will introduce you this evening to my brother. . . . Oh, you must understand, he is somewhat more of the great man than your very humble servant. He has retired from the cutlery trade, and now lives, like a worthy citizen of Barcelona, on a fine income. That house, the garden of which you see below, is his property. As for his daughter Maria, my niece, she has had an education which has caused her to be sought after as a most advantageous match."

"Whom is she to marry?"

"A young man of the best possible appearance," said Nunez, "and one that loves her . . . aye, that loves her!"

"And his name is?"

"Antonio Carral. He will be here this evening, so you will see him."

When Nunez left me I was quite delighted with the prospect that his invitation offered, and I counted to take the occasion to observe Spanish customs within the narrow circle of the life of the townsfolk.

Then, having repaired the disorder of my toilet, I took a turn in the Conja, which is situated in the quarter of Barcelonetta, quite close to the port.

I returned to Master Nunez' hostelry about three o'clock. He served me a good enough dinner, really much better than I should have expected, considering what an evil reputation the Spanish inns have. I noticed that he had changed his clothes, and that he had a sort of triumphal air. I thought I might ask him what was the cause of this change, which, for that matter, was entirely to his advantage, and he replied :

"Did not your lordship consent that I should introduce him to-night to my brother Valentio? I have made my preparations, and I am ready."

"At what time shall we go?"

"Whatever hour you may name, señor."

"Well, about eight o'clock; will that suit you?"

"Your lordship's will is mine," replied Master Nunez, bowing.

I know not why I, like Nunez, should have felt that I must repair the disorder of my clothes and reduce my ugliness to its lowest term. But I went up to my room, consulted my mirror, had a barber sent for, who did his best for me, and put on one of my gayest waistcoats. I gave my hat a gentle tilt towards my right ear, after carefully touching up the plume, so that it had all the gracefulness of a branch of a weeping willow.

When the hour named came, I opened my door and found Master Nunez awaiting me upon the staircase. He looked like a soldier standing sentinel, and seemed enchanted that I was punctual.

"Let us start," said I. "I am all anxiety to make your brother's acquaintance and to see your niece."

"Let us start," said Nunez.

We left the inn by a door which gave communication with Señor Valentio's house, and in less than a minute we were within the grounds of the retired merchant, grounds that consisted of a very fine garden, planted chiefly with fruit trees; the house was built more solidly than elegantly.

I was announced. Thereupon they held a reception of me with a pomp and ceremony that I could very well have dispensed with, but they knew that I was a Frenchman and a gentleman, and those are two attributes much prized in every country of the world, so I had to accommodate myself to the situation.

Señor Valentio was a man of about forty years of age, with an appearance and air above his former rank in life. If I had not been told beforehand that he was a retired trader, I should probably have taken him for a hidalgo of the third degree who had come down from the heights of his little provincial manor to mix with the common people of the town. In a word, his manners were very distinguished, and the little patronising salutation he bestowed upon his

relative, Gonzalo Nunez, the innkeeper, proved to me that he had almost forgotten his former calling.

But I took far less notice of Valentio than of his daughter, and when she, together with her betrothed, Antonio Carral, rose, upon my arrival, I turned my eyes in the direction of this interesting pair.

Maria was a pretty girl of seventeen, fresh, rosy, shapely, with auburn hair, and her grace was such as might have vied with the most accomplished Frenchwomen. Her eyes had an inexpressible sweetness, and one might infer from the expression of her face that her husband would never, in his domestic life, have to struggle with one of those stubborn wills which so often convert a marriage into a veritable inferno. No one could deny that Maria possessed the most seductive qualities; but she lacked that inscrutable charm which draws hearts to it by the supremacy of an active and vigorous nature.

As for Antonio, he was a tall and slender young man, with abundant dark hair, who seemed quite absorbed in his passion. He gazed upon Maria with long and ardent glances. He scarcely turned from her to acknowledge my presence. It is true that from time to time Maria rewarded him with some encouraging looks, for which a saint would have got himself damned.

These worthy folk seemed at first a great deal embarrassed, but I soon put them at their ease by setting a conversation afoot, which, within a quarter

of an hour, became as interesting and lively as might be. I spoke to them of Barcelona, of the beauties of their country, of the sights of the town, and the fine appearance of the Spanish race. This last subject flattered them especially, and Antonio told me, with visible satisfaction, that his father, at seventy years of age, had caught the fancy of a señora under thirty, with whom he had made his third marriage.

"If you go on," I said to him, "you may do as your father, and in any case you have made good work enough of it already to be free of all reproaches on that head."

Maria understood this indirect compliment, and modestly lowered her eyes. Antonio Carral thanked me by a movement of his head.

The rest of the evening was passed in recounting more or less strange adventures. Valentio did not lack a ready wit, and made as good a listener as speaker. He asked me in turn about France, about the court of Versailles, and the king; and the anecdotes with which my memory supplied me at the time seemed to evoke a lively interest in him.

Strange as it may appear—though no doubt the change which time had wrought in my character will account for it, as I was now quieter and less inclined to wild escapades—I found an unusual attraction in these tranquil gatherings, which were resumed several nights in succession. I was glad to observe the happiness of this worthy family, and, though it may surprise

the reader, who is accustomed to see me act upon other lines, yet the person for whom I soon felt most sympathy and friendship was Señor Antonio, the young betrothed lover of Maria.

So it will easily be guessed, without need for an explanation, that, contrary to my custom, I was unmoved before the laughing eyes of a young, promising, and, as I must own, extremely pretty woman.

However, I must not make myself out to be more virtuous than I am, or give the impression that I was working towards my salvation in the other world or my canonisation in this.

The influences of the climate of the Peninsula, you may well believe, had not changed me into a little stone statue, unassailable by temptation.

Maria did not please me; there is the whole secret of my virtue.

On the other hand, I found Antonio a rare good-hearted fellow, whose candour was above suspicion, while his sayings and his behaviour to Maria gave proof of a thousand good qualities. I also thought him sincerely enamoured. All these reasons had prompted me to conceive a real friendship for him.

As Master Nunez had told me the wedding was to take place in a week, Valentio was concerning himself about the preparations for this great ceremony like a man who understands the importance of it. The worthy man was very proud of his daughter, and made it a point of honour to have many guests at

her marriage and spend a great deal of money on it.

I will pass lightly over all the little details which preceded Maria's wedding. There was nothing of interest in them, and I am eager to come to a singular adventure which occurred on the very night of the fête, of which I was happy enough to be the hero.

I say "happy enough" because I had occasion to congratulate myself on a result of which I had not cherished the least hope, and also because, even while working for my own ends, I may boast of having done a good deed.

I beg the reader to pardon this digression, which reads like a panegyric, of the kind which the gentlemen of the Châtelet sometimes slip into their pleadings for the necessities of the case in hand, and I will beg him to pass on to the succeeding chapter, where all that is obscure in the present will be clearly and modestly explained.

CHAPTER LIV

The wedding of Antonio and Maria—The fête in the garden—The fair Spaniard—The bolero—I dance it with Maria—The fandango—The grove—Antonio and Señora Nerina de Xenarez—Strange threats—Surrender—I make the acquaintance of the young Inès—Her portrait—Her sadness—She does not dance—At sixteen!—Secret of her sadness—She recounts her misfortunes to me—The end of the fête—Midnight—To return to Nerina—The sad Antonio's melancholy dilemma—I determine to rescue him—The nuptial couch—Nerina's room—One in lieu of the other—The strange way in which I make the acquaintance of a very pretty and very interesting señora—A dangerous beginning—A reasonable conversation—A lesson in morals—A service that old Valentio renders me without intending it—The rest of my conversation with Nerina—Will she go to bed? Will she not?—Long negotiation thereupon—Nerina in bed—Impression made upon me by the delightful sight offered to my eyes—Description of certain mysterious points of detail—An inward struggle—I am unable to resist—Nerina and I begin to come to an understanding—A perfect agreement—A little address to those gloomy philosophers who may take umbrage at my behaviour.

I do not remember having ever been present at a merrier fête than that given at the wedding of Maria and Antonio Carral.

After a repast which was worthy of the occasion, and followed at once upon the ceremony in church, those invited betook themselves to Valentio's garden,

every walk of which was soon filled by a crowd of guests, men and women, youths and maids. The latter especially were so numerous that I asked Antonio what was the cause of such a gathering.

"My wife," he replied, with a proud accent that displayed all the happiness he felt in using the word—"my wife was a member of five sisterhoods, called after the various titles of the Holy Trinity, the wounds of Christ, the rosary of the Virgin, and others also, whose names I forget. All these girls, so to say, are her sisters in religion."

Scarcely had Antonio finished the sentence, when I saw him tremble and turn pale. He seized my arm with a tight grasp, and murmured two or three words, which I could not catch.

"What is the matter?" I said, supporting him, for he staggered.

"Nothing," he answered, "nothing."

And, snatching himself away from me, as it were, he disappeared in the shadows of a walk close by.

I looked in the opposite direction to that in which Antonio had fled, hoping to divine what had been the cause of his fright. I saw nothing but a charming group of girls, who were running towards us laughing and skipping. Further, I was struck by the appearance of a woman of about five-and-twenty, who, inattentive to all the childish clamour that was raised around, remained seated on a garden bench, and showed a grave and melancholy face amidst all the joyous hubbub.

I own that at that moment I forgot Antonio and his sudden indisposition in order to contemplate, at my ease and unnoticed by her, this very gracious señora.

She perfectly realised the idea I had formed of the Spanish ladies. Her dark eyes were full of ardours, her hair had the bright reflections of jet, her skin was of the Moorish tint, the nose slightly arched, the chin delicate, small and finely-shaped hands, an admirable neck, a nobly modelled bust, a small foot, and in a word her whole person combined to display that union of delicacy, elegance and refined suppleness which is represented to us as the perfect type of Castilian loveliness. She appeared to me to be plunged in a very serious meditation. At times I even thought I observed upon her lips such movements as must be attributable to anger or disgust. Whatever may have been her thought, I soon discerned that it was absolutely divorced from gaiety.

But why should she bring to this fête, to a wedding-feast, such sad thoughts and such a meditative brow?

Here was a matter for reflection, and I searched my mind for the answer to the riddle; as I did so, a small voice aroused me from my absorption, and I turned about.

It was Maria, Maria whom I had forgotten, Maria whose partner I had promised to be, while I made

excuses for that clumsiness I should no doubt display, because I knew nothing of the dances of the country.

"Ah! forgive me," I said to her. "What will they say of me when ladies are obliged to come to fetch me as it were by force?"

"No one but myself will know it," said the pretty bride graciously, "and it is easier to forgive you because your excuse lies in the beauty of her whom you were scrutinising so closely."

"Ah! yes, yes," I stammered. "What? You noticed . . ."

"Of course . . . but you are wrong to protest. Señora Nerina de Xenarez is considered one of the most lovely women in all the province of Aragon, where she was born, and it is natural she should be admired . . . but that is no reason why you should not dance the bolero with me."

"If I can."

"I will guide you. You will see it is very easy. But I hear the musicians beginning. Come . . . come at once."

I followed Maria. But as I withdrew I cast a stealthy glance towards her whose name and country I had just learned. I know not if it were an illusion, or if I really saw it, but I thought she cast upon Maria a glance of hatred and defiance.

Maria taught me to dance the bolero. I made a very poor business of it, I assure you; but they treated

me indulgently, and only laughed at me a little. I was even adjudged to be worthy of a recompense, and Valentio, having had a seat placed at such a height that I could plainly see all that passed in front of me, told me that several of his guests proposed to dance a fandango in my honour.

I expressed my gratitude to Valentio, and the fandango began.

Beyond all doubt this dance is the very expression of Spanish passion. The men and the women take a really singular part in it. There is the declaration of love with all its delicate *nuances*, the strife in all its most unexpected developments, resistance in every form, and then, at last, defeat on one side and victory on the other, done in all the eloquence of action. But it must not be supposed that the case is more serious than it is. It is merely the simulacrum of an amorous *tête-à-tête*. So to say, the fandango is one long kiss.

The one who danced it the best was certainly Señora Nerina, who, as the orchestra played its last notes, left her partner and disappeared.

After this interlude, which had brought my mind to a troubled state that I cannot convey, I plunged into the shady part of the garden to seek a little cool and fresh air, whereof my heated bosom had great need. Night had now begun to fall, and Valentio had just ordered that the edges of the lawn where they were dancing should be lighted up, and the

result was an outburst of mirth and admiration, under cover of which I slipped away unobserved.

I walked about for five minutes, breathing deeply, and I repaired as best I could the disarray of my lace, for the bolero had put me in some disorder.

I soon felt myself to be in better trim, and was preparing to return to the dancing, when I thought I overheard voices in the neighbouring coppice.

I drew near on tiptoe, holding my breath and trying to see through the foliage.

Great, indeed, was my surprise!

Those whom I had just escaped affrighting were an amorous pair, and in this amorous pair, incredible as it may seem, I recognised Antonio Carral, the bridegroom of a few hours, and Señora Nerina de Xenarez, the fair Aragonese.

If I had moved I should have startled them. Further, I should have deprived myself of participation in a scene which gave promise of being curious. Whether it were from kindness or lack of due discreetness, I stayed where I was.

And here, except that I do not give it word for word, is the strange dialogue that reached my ears:

“No, I will grant no pardon,” cried Nerina, tapping the ground with her foot; “I will not have pity on you or on her! I will ruin you both!”

“Nerina!” said Antonio. “You whom I have known so gentle, and whom I thought so kind!”

“Then you loved me,” replied the young Spanish woman bitterly, “and I really possessed all the good qualities and virtues which your love attributed to me. But now it is different; all is changed, your heart, our position, everything . . . everything . . . except my love; not that it is the same love that you have so often thanked me for on your knees . . . no, now it is jealousy, anger, madness . . . and, I repeat it for the last time, Antonio, I will avenge myself.”

It is not possible to imagine how splendid an aureole shone at that moment round the forehead of the fair Nerina de Xenarez. A ray of that illumination which had been ordered by Señor Valentio fell directly upon her, and I could satisfy my pleasure in this curious sight to the full. Her eyes were naturally bright, and now flashed rays out which lighted up objects around her; her breathing was of that loud and deep sort which betokens real anger. But her attitude was calm, firm and energetic. She might have been a queen, clad in her royal robes and preparing to dictate laws to kneeling subjects. Poor Antonio, thus standing like a prisoner before his judge, seemed to have lost even his natural dignity. Her voice had been vibrating and sonorous, and seemed to make the young man giddy and to stupefy him. He recoiled before the woman's menaces, like a child who should have received his father's curse in his ears.

Then he threw himself down upon a little turfy

rise that stretched round the coppice, and remained there for awhile in a crouching attitude, his forehead in his hands, without moving.

Then he suddenly rose and muttered :

“What do you wish ?”

“I have told you already—that you shall give up to me this night, which belongs to a woman I detest ! I will have you at my side, alone, in secret ; you are to be mine, and altogether mine, this one last time, coward though you be ! . . . You tremble. . . . As if you could not dedicate one day to me, when, in spite of all your vows, you are going to give your whole life and your whole soul to another !”

“And if I braved your threat,” replied Antonio ; “if I gave to your challenge the one response it deserves, contempt . . . what would you do ?”

“You have a bad memory, Antonio ; for I have already told you ; I should go to the little ebony box you gave me last year and seek out all the letters you have written me since the powers of evil threw me into your arms . . .”

“And the box ?”

“Would be handed to-morrow to Antonio Carral’s wife, just when you awoke in one another’s arms, quivering with love and happiness.”

At this calm irony of Nerina’s, Antonio started.

“No,” he resumed violently, “no ! You are incapable of such a deed.”

“I am capable of any deed to have revenge

Besides, I hate Maria, she is too beautiful ; you love her too much ! I tell you again that I hate her."

"My God ! my God !" said Antonio in a beseeching voice. "Must the innocent suffer for the guilty ?"

"You are a bad Christian, for you call God to witness to an act of treachery !" replied Nerina. "And you do not even understand that the more you compassionate her, the less I shall spare her, and that I envy her even more than I regret you ! Ah, you are like all men ; they can but talk and deceive and enjoy the fruits of their deception . . . they know not how to love. We at least have blood in our veins and passions ! When we no longer love, we hate . . . Oh, Jesús, Jesús, I am in pain . . . I seem to be falling . . . I am dying !"

And Nerina did indeed shrink together, as if she had been stricken by a mortal wound.

Then the scene suddenly and strangely changed. Antonio, who but now had been so submissive and dejected, seemed, confronted by this heart-breaking sight, to recover a little of the energy that he had lacked so long. Before him was the woman, overwhelmed, exhausted, like one dying. Her breast heaved with plaintive sighs, and I felt that in her unhappy heart was a storm of tears which sought escape but could not find it.

The sight was indeed a sad one.

Then a feeling of pity seemed to take possession

of Antonio, and he avished the tenderest and most zealous attentions upon her.

When Nerina opened her eyes again, she gazed at Antonio in silence, and seeing the look of compassion that appeared there :

“Yes,” said she, “I divine all that is in your thoughts. You feel for me such pity as is given to one sick or mad. You no longer love me, but you have not the strength to hate me. Well, listen ; aid me to heal this miserable spirit of mine which languishes in pain . . . aid me to satisfy the thirst for triumph and sway which possesses me ; if I cannot assuage it, the consequences will be so terrible, so frightful . . . that they daunt even me. Come, do not refuse me this ! Give all your life, all your years, all your future to your bride, who has snatched my rights from me, and made me a miserable and abandoned wretch. I will not strive with her again for this treasure which was mine, but there is one condition . . .”

“And it is ?”

“That which I have said,” replied Nerina, whose set eyes seemed to conceal one stubborn and implacable thought. “Soon, when the nuptial chamber is opened, and you are both called to that meeting which is no doubt the object of her wishes, as of yours, ungrateful one ! . . . when that moment comes, I say, you must invent a reason, an excuse, a pretext, let it be what you will, so that you shall not cross

that threshold, which is still to sever you from my hated rival. You must say that you are ill, in pain, and must withdraw to your room, and there you will say that you require to be alone, and you will make a feint of shutting yourself in. But, instead of that, you will slip into the dark passage at the end of which is the room Señor Valentio has had prepared for me to-night. I shall be there, I shall be waiting for you, I shall listen for the sound of your steps, and if I see that you have obeyed my bidding, if your presence proves to me that I have succeeded in winning a final victory from my odious rival—if, in a word, you come, then perhaps I shall grant you, on terms that are not very hard, what I refuse you here—forgiveness.”

“And if I refused to do that which you wish?”

“To-morrow, Antonio, Maria should know that your heart had already been utterly given to another mistress, a hundred times more adored, perchance, than she will ever be by you. She would read these letters that I have here, see, above my heart, and the fire of them would burn her as it burns me now. I have told you what I desire, and I leave you free to choose. I only await your answer.”

“But if I come to this meeting which you exact from me, I may at least feel sure, Nerina, that you will renounce your vengeance?”

“By my soul’s salvation, Antonio, I swear it to you!”

“Well, I will come.”

And this strange pair of lovers separated without saying farewell. But a hand-clasp sealed their mutual promise; and then all was silent again.

How curious an affair! Was it not necessary to have made the journey to Spain to see an instance of so singular and unheard-of a revenge? I could have understood, to some extent, the use of the dagger or of poison, or such fury in Nerina as would have led her to throw herself between bride and bridegroom at the altar, at the very moment when the priest was about to consecrate their union. Jealousy is fertile in mad conceits, I own, but I should never have guessed at such a strange idea. To rob a bride of her wedding-night! In my view, 'tis a refinement of cruelty of which I should not have believed a woman's heart capable.

However, when I thought more deeply upon it, I began to read Nerina's heart more clearly. Who knows? Perhaps she had loved Antonio passionately, and mysteries which must not be lightly dismissed underlie all human passions.

Perhaps it was excess of love which inspired her with this excess of hatred!

Well, love, of whatsoever quality it be, and where-soever appearing, is it not in itself an excuse?

In such a matter, to condemn the one and excuse the other precipitately is to risk giving a rash judgment.

I waited till they were quite at a distance ere

I quitted my post of observation. . . . Then I hastened to the lawn, where the girls were dancing in a merry ring round the bride. I felt a keen spasm of pity when I thought of the poor child's untroubled happiness and of the strange conspiracy which was formed against her.

The ball was still in progress. I wandered dreamily down the first flower-bordered path to which I came.

I had been walking thus for some minutes, thinking of what I had just heard, and full of alarm at the results which Nerina's resolve might entail on the future of Maria and Antonio.

I felt real pity for these two young people, and work my brains as I would to find an issue from the labyrinth in which they were entangled, I yet despaired of preventing what had been contrived. . . .

In this mood, and absorbed by this one idea, I looked neither in front of me nor to the sides. Thus it came that unintentionally I pushed against a girl who was walking ahead of me in the same direction.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," I said to her.

The girl was in a dreamy mood like myself. She turned her big dark eyes upon me; they were shaped like Nerina's in the Spanish mould, which is the prettiest in the world.

"Ah! what are you doing here, señorita, alone . . . without a partner, and almost sad?"

She did not answer, but she blushed deeply.

"Do you not dance?" I asked her, trying to detain her.

"I do not dance any more, sir."

Not to dance any more! At her age! What could be the cause of such a resolve? In spite of the preoccupation into which I had fallen after the scene between Antonio and Nerina, I could not repress a feeling of curiosity.

"Even if you do not dance, señorita, no doubt you are not vowed to silence; so pray accept my arm. This garden affords us a charming walking-place. Will it not be better to profit by it jointly, than to walk each one on a separate path, like recluses who have accepted the severe rules of some tedious monastery? Two together can make observations . . . and in case of need . . . can even console one another."

This remark seemed to affect the Spanish girl. She passed her arm under my arm, and we began to stroll together.

"Since you so graciously accord me the favour I ask of you, señorita, allow me to become a little more exacting. Tell me your name."

"I am called Inès de Jordana, and I come from Seville."

"And how does it happen, charming Inès, that being of Seville, and fair as you are, how does it happen, I say, that you seem to condemn yourself to play a part which only suits an ugly woman or a

duenna? If sweet Inès de Jordana does not dance, she robs everyone she knows of the pleasure she could give them, honour bright."

"I can understand," replied Inès in a voice of much emotion, "that you are surprised to see a girl of my age who, at a fête so gay as this with which Señor Valentio has entertained us, does not even attempt to take part in it. But your astonishment would instantly end, señor, if you knew that I am bound by a vow to the Virgin, and that my father's salvation is concerned in my not violating my oath."

I made, inwardly, a reflection that all these Spanish women were worthy of ancient Sparta. It will be seen that the answer I had from Inès was not of a kind to satisfy my curiosity of which I spoke above. So I exclaimed:

"A vow, señorita! A vow which interdicts gaiety, amusement, and dancing! Why, 'tis no less than slaughter! Come . . . are not you rallying me, perhaps?"

"Heaven forbid, sir," said Inès, gravely. "Those who jest have hearts free from anxiety and care, while mine . . ."

"Yours?"

"Is consumed with bitterness and torn with anguish . . . oh! but such anguish as can only be understood by those who have experienced it."

Such language was well calculated to arouse the compassion of a sympathetic mind. My mind re-

sponded to all human impulses, and I pressed Inès's hand, and said to her :

"I am but a stranger to you. Chance brings us together, and chance will part us. But yet, if I am happy enough to inspire any confidence in you, will not you consent to tell me the cause of your grief?"

"You seem kind," replied Inès, "and then you are a Frenchman. Those two reasons suffice me. Look, here are some seats; let us be seated, and in a few moments you shall know why Inès de Jordana can dance no more, and wishes to dance no more."

I did as Inès desired. We sat down opposite to one another, and for a considerable time we preserved silence. This she at length broke by asking me :

"Señor, do you know the Inquisition?"

"Not personally, señorita, and I am not sorry that it is so; but I have heard it a great deal talked of. It has a European reputation."

"Then you know how it judges and how it condemns?"

"If we were not in Spain, señorita, I should abuse the Inquisition roundly to you. But here, in the land of Ferdinand and Isabella of Castile, in the country where Torquemada was born, I know not if that would be very prudent."

"No one will hear us," replied the Spanish girl, "and we can speak with all freedom."

"Well, señorita, if I must tell you all I think, the Inquisition is not to my liking, and if I had the distinction to be Pope, I should suppress it without more ado."

"And you would do well, señor, you would do well! For the rule of the Inquisitors is the rule of devils upon earth."

As Inès said these words, her face lit up. She might have been a saint preaching on some religious theme.

"I am entirely of your opinion," I replied after a long pause; "but how can you, an innocent child, be concerned with the all-powerful Inquisition?"

"Listen," replied Inès, with the tone and manner of one inspired. "A year ago I was living with my father in Seville, where I was born. I was happy, gay, careless. I thought of nothing but happiness. And happiness was in my reach, it was within me, around me, everywhere. Never has a girl sunk more tranquilly to rest or arisen with a brighter confidence than I in those days . . . at night I prayed to God; in the morning I embraced my father. Thus I was twice blessed!

"One morning my father went forth as usual, after kissing me on the forehead. He was sad and anxious. I asked him what caused his care, but he refused to answer me.

"That night he did not return.

"Need I tell you my alarm, sir? I hurried through

every part of Seville. For a week my hopes were ever being raised only to be crushed. . . . Was my father dead? I thought so at first . . . but soon I learned—and the news was as terrible as would have been the news of his death—that he was imprisoned in the cells of the Inquisition.

“What was his crime? I went to ask the question of his judges. They told me that he had been denounced and arrested as a blasphemer. They added that they were busily engaged in drawing up the accusation against him.

“The accusation!

“The mere word seemed to dry up the sources of life in my heart. Accusation, in the language of the Holy Office, means condemnation.

“I begged . . . I sobbed. . . . I was dismissed without a hearing.

“From that day my life was one long torture.

“One day—a horrible day, the memory of which rises like a phantom before me in my dreams—I heard it proclaimed to the sound of the trumpet in the streets of Seville, that three wretches, condemned by the terrible tribunal, would be executed. My father was not among the condemned . . .

“Yet I wished to see with my own eyes if what they said about the abominations decreed by the Inquisition were true.

“At the hour named I went to the great square.

“There was a huge, turbulent throng, tingling

with expectation. All the faces were merry ; it might have been a fête.

“ I drew as near as possible to the place of torment.

“ The faggots were piled ready.

“ Alguazils and soldiers guarded the approaches. Before the stake an altar was to be seen. Priests were waiting there in their cassocks with missals in their hands, as if some Christian ceremony had been in progress.

“ I was greatly terrified, yet I kept my heart up. I resolved firmly to remain to the end.

“ I asked those around me what crime had been committed by the three wretches for whom these dreadful preparations had been made. They told me very quietly that they were sorcerers.

“ I asked if blasphemers and sorcerers were treated alike, and if the punishment was the same for both kinds of offenders.

“ ‘ They are all burned,’ said a common fellow, with a stupid laugh. ‘ The Holy Office does not like to make jealousies.’

“ Just then the victims arrived. Throughout the whole multitude that was waiting there passed a deep sound, like that of the angry sea. All heads were turned in one direction. It was such a fine sight, forsooth, to see three wretches, accused of an impossible crime, burned in cold blood !

“ The reasons for the decision and the sentence had just been read in the church hard by, in presence

of the assembled tribunal. The condemned men walked to their doom robed in horsehair, with bare heads and feet. . . . When they were in front of the faggots, they were made to kneel, and the prayers for the dying were begun. It was horrible to see. But they made me observe that the Church, in slaying her victims, took especial care of their souls. . . . They were allowed to communicate.

"My eyes, señor, were not closed a single instant. The priest who was at the head of the Holy Office uttered a word that I could not hear, and the executioner, seizing the three victims one after the other, placed them in a row upon the faggots.

"There was a mighty acclamation at the act, and so loud a noise filled the whole town that I thought the trumpet of the last judgment had sounded.

"No, it was the joy of the crowd which was voiced in this outcry, proceeding from a hundred thousand throats.

"They had just set fire to the faggots, and the flames were mounting to heaven.

"To tell you, señor, what shrieks reached my ears, what heartrending words were wrung from the very entrails of the condemned, the horrible effect produced by the clapping of hands throughout the crowd, the crackling of the blazing wood, and the long notes of the *Misereve* sung by the monks, to tell you all this would be utterly impossible to me.

"The more one sees of such horrors, the less can one relate them. . . .

"Memory is paralysed, the tongue is frozen, one can do naught but weep."

And Inès, in fact, burst into tears.

"But your father," I cried, taking her hands, "your father?"

"My father was to be judged on the next day but one. I ran to the prison like a madwoman. The image of the burning stake never left my brain. . . . I could not have my father perish so. . . . I begged on my knees for permission to be taken to him. . . . It was refused for a long time . . . at last, however, my tears softened those tigerish hearts. The daughter was allowed to embrace her father. . . .

"My poor father! He too had begged to be allowed to embrace his daughter, and they had relentlessly denied it to him.

"When he saw me he rose, pressed his hands to his forehead, and moved towards me. I caught him in my embrace, I covered his face with kisses, I pressed him to me as close as I could, that he might feel his child's heart beat against his own!

"Ah, rash and cruel that I was! What the executioner had not yet done I did, I, his own flesh and blood!—I, the old man's child!

"The poor prisoner, who had been told that he would never see his child again, had not been able to bear up under his great and unexpected joy. . . .

"When my arms unclosed from around him, I felt that he was falling, and I uttered a cry.

"He was dead!"

Inès stopped. Tears once more flowed down her face. I tried to make her listen to some words of consolation. But with a voice gentle as an angel's she replied :

"For such grief no consolation is possible, señor. For a year I have suffered, and have taken pleasure in my suffering, which is like a perpetual testimony of my filial love. I weep for my father and pray to God for him. If the religious houses, which are so abundant in Spain, did not so hatefully recall the Inquisition to me, I should already have entered a convent, but that would be in the name of the Catholicism which struck my father down, and I will owe nothing to Catholicism, not even peace. I have vowed never to marry and to live apart from all the pleasures of the world. If I were not an intimate friend of Maria's you would not see me here. Now you know all, señor . . . you know why I am sad, why I seek solitude, and why I dance no more."

This simple explanation touched me deeply. It instantly evoked in me a respectful brotherly love for the innocent and unhappy child. I would have given half my life to save her from future misery. I made her understand my sentiment by a few words, and this, though it was not deep-rooted, was genuine. An affectionate glance and a pressure of the hand were my reward.

Matters stood thus, when an old lady wearing a veil came up to us and said to my companion :

“Mademoiselle Inès, did you not purpose to retire early?”

“Yes, Pepita. Give me my mantilla.”

“You are going to leave us?”

“Yes, I am going.”

“Adieu, señorita. But one word more before we part.”

“I am listening.”

“Will you allow me, when I address my supplications to Heaven, to keep a place in my prayers for him whom you mourn?”

“Oh! I thank you, I thank you,” she cried with the accents of true gratitude. “You could not thank me better for the trust I have reposed in you.”

She withdrew rapidly, flitting among the shadows of the garden.

I seated myself again, for I had to allow my emotion time to subside.

The rest of the fête passed without incidents worthy of description.

About midnight a kind of mysterious concerto was to be heard, in which I distinguished the voices of female singers and the sound of two or three lutes or guitars played in unison. This was yet another invention of the kindly Valentio, who no doubt wished that his charming daughter should repair to the nuptial couch in a merry mood.

Just at this time a large number of the guests took their leave. Only a few who had come in from the

country, and for whom Valentio had had lodging prepared, remained and followed the bride into the house. I was of this latter number, and as I glanced at the group in front of me I saw Antonio Carral, who was as pale as a ghost.

The women and the girls embraced Maria tenderly; then she was intrusted to the care of two worthy matrons whose duty it doubtless was to prepare the young neophyte for those contests wherein she must engage.

Only one of the women present avoided the kiss that custom compelled them to give the bride. This was the lovely Nerina de Xenarez, whose face revealed her deep and secret chagrin.

At last the party broke up, and as Valentio's house had once been a convent, and the rooms were built like nuns' cells, each guest betook himself to those passages which led to the several retreats, and such as were husbands went alone to their rooms.

Then I saw Antonio stagger. He was already stammering some phrases to give the impression that he was taken with sudden illness, and I, who was but a few paces' distance from him, forthwith understood that he was submitting himself to that cruel ordinance which had been laid upon him by Nerina, and was resigning himself to this lie, or rather comedy, to spare Maria—a miserable victim, whose future was menaced in the very midst of her bliss by the infamous demands of a cruel and jealous heart and a reckless mind.

I determined that I would save Antonio and save Maria.

Here is the means I hit on to bring it to success.

I took a sharp turn about and called out to Antonio.

"What is the matter?" says he.

I led him aside, and waited till the matrons had taken Maria a little apart.

"I have something to tell you," said I to him, "on behalf of a certain lady who is called, I believe, Nerina de Xenarez . . ."

"To me . . . from . . ."

"The lady I have just named. . . . Yes, just now, as she went upstairs, she bade me tell you, my dear Antonio, that she released you from your word, begging you to consider yourself entirely free, and take no further heed of what you had promised to her. I own I made nothing out of this dark and ambiguous saying; but she who committed it to me told me she made appeal to my courtesy and to my friendship for you, and I thought I should do ill to refuse her the service she was so good as to intrust me with."

Antonio was dumb with astonishment, and looked at me with an air of bewilderment.

"What, with no further explanation, and without light thrown on it . . . she . . . Nerina has sent you to me?"

"To deliver the message you have just heard,

certainly, my dear Antonio. But ask me no more. I have fulfilled my mission with that exact good faith which befits an honest envoy. Now let me get to bed, and do you the same. The deuce! were I in your place I should not be behindhand."

"Why, that is right . . . but . . ."

"But what?"

"I can scarcely understand."

"If you do not understand, 'tis as plain as a pike-staff that I can make still less out of it than you, my dear Antonio. But allow me to offer one remark."

"Say on."

"If we believed only in what we see quite clearly, faith would be an empty, would it not, my friend?"

"That's true enough."

"Events come in this world which a man must accept blindly, just as chance brings them about, or God sends them. Make that your philosophy to-night, and I assure you you could not better it for the purpose. Come, come . . ."

Antonio reeled.

"How?" I cried. "Will you be ill now?"

"'Tis nothing . . . mere unsteadiness . . . extreme feeling . . ."

"Eh!" I exclaimed, "how weak a man are you that cannot bear his own happiness! Do you think, my dear Antonio, that if I were in your place, if sweet Maria were awaiting me, in the attire I can guess at, I should waste my time in groaning and

fainting-fits. . . . Come, be yourself again, and hasten whither you are longed for”

A gladsome fire began to shine once more in Antonio's dark eyes.

“You are right,” he cried at length, while his delight betrayed itself in a kind of wildness that I feigned not to perceive. “I will go back to Maria. Farewell, Monsieur de Roquelaure, farewell !”

He went but a little way, then returned to say :

“You know not all I owe you, and what a service you have done me. Oh ! be sure the Virgin and the saints in heaven will reward you for it.”

And then, still pointing to the sky, he ran off like one possessed.

The effect of Antonio's goodwill in recommending me so cordially to the celestial denizens of Paradise would not be immediate, so I turned my thoughts to completing my work, and took my way as softly as I could towards the door of the fair and vengeful Nerina.

This door, as I had been careful to notice beforehand, so that I might come at the place in spite of the darkness—this door, I say, was ajar. As I approached, I could assure myself that Nerina had extinguished her candle. However, a pale faint light fell upon the floor. It was a ray of moonlight, which passed between the curtains.

Here I cannot refrain from recording that this night now put on record was perhaps the best filled

and the busiest in all my life. I cannot recall that ever, under any circumstances, my heart has made the experience of so many emotions in so few hours. The mournful story told me by Inès was still in my ears. The death of her father, her touching melancholy, the Inquisition, the stake, the Seville mob, the meeting in the prison, the sorcerers, the blasphemers and the *Miserere*, all played havoc in my brains to such a pitch that at one moment I felt quite sure I should lose my reason. However, I was a man to endure such strife; the vigour of my character when there were adventures to be carried through was equal to the suppleness and activity of my body. I was always ready for everything. I owe it to this that I have done more, thought more, and spoken more perhaps than any other man.

This was no time to think of Inès and her misfortunes.

I had a different mission to fulfil with Nerina; so I threw myself into it heart and soul.

I divested myself noiselessly of my hat with feathers, my short cloak and my sword, for this latter item of my costume seemed to me especially superfluous when I was going to talk with a nervous little woman who must before all things be brought to reason by gentle methods. As I drew near I built up in my mind a splendid structure of morals and philosophy which a doctor of the Sorbonne or a preacher in vogue would gladly have claimed as his

own. I thought there would be outcry and fainting and tears, and I was ready for them all, like a veteran.

The sound of my approach had been heard. The door turned back upon its hinges, and I was admitted without the slightest obstacle.

It seemed that Madame de Xenarez understood love-affairs and the Spanish arts of seduction to the full; she kept the immaterial movement of the soul in line with the ardour of the senses, and, in her view, even revenge should appear with all the taking attributes of pleasure. In reality, there was something devilish in the procedure to which she had wrought Antonio, and this meeting, snatched by the mistress from the bride, was perhaps the most diabolical invention that a coquette has ever been able to boast of. So Nerina was awaiting the hour of her triumph without feeling certain of it, and she had so prepared herself as to keep her quarry the more surely in the snare, in case, as she hoped, he would step into it of his own accord.

No sooner had I entered Nerina's room than I heard the door shut and the bolt pushed, as if a jailor had been anxious to close the one exit from my prison. I turned about . . . not a word did I find to say. For two lips that fastened themselves to mine rendered me quite dumb.

'Twas a sharp and unexpected attack.

I collected myself, and tried to understand what was going forward. . . .

The explanation was not very difficult ; I may say that I had it at my fingers' ends.

Nerina was holding me tightly with both her arms. Against my breast I felt the palpitations of two spheres that were but covered by the slight tissue of a cambric garment adorned with embroidery. A graceful, supple and quivering form clung to me. . . . My hands, emboldened by the unforeseen encouragement they received, came to rest upon such admirably-shaped hips, that but for the mobility of which these charming contours owed to life, I might have thought I was studying, by the help of the sense of touch, one of those ancient statues which represent Venus covering her charms, or Diana, goddess of the chase. . . . A sweet warmth was conveyed to my whole person. . . . I felt the beating of her heart, I lost myself in that close embrace which joined two in one, and I breathed the divine fragrance which issued from a mouth as fresh as a carnation . . . then my sight grew confused and all whirled in my brain. . . . I was drunk with delight. . . .

But how would this end? Had I come there to gather pleasure? Was this the moment to snatch happiness?

"Come," said I to myself, "come, Roquelaure, be a man of firmness . . . and never spoil a noble deed by a piece of folly."

So I forcibly restrained myself.

I determined I would be calm . . . and I forced calmness upon myself.

It may seem strange . . . but that is what I did.

So I released myself by a movement, which may have been rather sudden, from Nerina's embrace, I took three steps backward, and cried in a voice of much emotion :

"Beware, Madame, you are in error. . . ."

When Joseph of chaste memory left his cloak in the lascivious hands of Potiphar's wife, he certainly cut no nobler a figure than I did then.

Nerina made so angry and violent a movement away from me that I thought she would fall against the opposite wall of the room. I hastened forward to stay her, but she forbade me, by a very imperious gesture, to draw nigh her, and said, in a voice ringing with anger :

"Who are you who have dared to enter like a thief where your very presence is an insult ? "

"I have no reason, Madame, to conceal my name from you. I am called Jean-Baptiste-Gaston Duc de Roquelaure. I am a gentleman in the service of the great king Louis XIV., one that usually resides in France, but now I am in Spain, and I own that I myself scarce know the reason why I am there. But I should be sorry indeed to have missed the journey, for I had the pleasure of seeing but two hours ago what may well be the prettiest, most taking, and most gracious sight in the world, a Spanish woman dancing the fandango."

"You know not to whom you are speaking,"

replied Nerina, directing scathing glances upon me, "if you think that you can use irony with impunity against me after making an exhibition of insolence. Neither the one nor the other, be assured, will profit you. Leave me . . . leave me at once!"

"Recall that severe order yourself, I beg you, señora, if you would not have me yet again brave your anger . . . for I shall not leave you."

"Your violence, sir, surprises me as much as it insults me," said Nerina, who began to be afraid of my obstinacy; "for . . . what if I expected someone?"

"I know that you are expecting someone, señora. . . . But be reassured, the someone will not come."

"Of whom are you speaking?"

"Of him for whom you were keeping your door ajar but now . . . of him to whom I owe, señora, such a charming kiss."

"Monsieur, yet again . . . I do not understand you."

"You will understand me, señora," I resumed in a serious voice, "when I tell you that Antonio Carral is now with Maria, his wife, and that he will remain with her all night, as his hope was and as his duty is."

Nerina forgot her resentment, the very disorder of her night-array, and even the dignity of the offended woman. She came up to me, grasped my arm, and said in an unsteady voice:

"So, he braves me and defies me! Good! He

shall know to-morrow what this new insult is to cost him."

Then Nerina's anger gave way to a fit of feverish sensibility ; she began to cry aloud, and hid her face in her hands.

Then I, in turn, drew near to her, and made her be seated. I took my place at her side and addressed her thus :

" I beg you, señora, to banish from your mind the stern prejudice whereof I am at present the object, and listen to me without attributing any hidden design to me, and without thinking that it is my purpose to wound or grieve you. All my life, señora, I have been devoted to beauty, to grace, and, in a word, to all that inspires love, and you cannot suppose that when I have before me the most perfect expression, aye, perhaps the very ideal that I have always sought, I shall desert my principles, and do anything which would rightly vex you . . . or give you cause of complaint."

She made me understand by a sign that she gave me her attention, and I used entire frankness in dealing with her. I told her how I had overheard her conversation with Antonio by chance ; I explained the stratagem I had used to make Antonio believe he was excused from a meeting which she must own she had forcibly exacted from him, and that by means scarce worthy of her . . . I took full responsibility for all that had happened, and then added :

"Now, señora, be just . . . have I done well or have I done ill? Examine your conscience, ask your heart, invoke that inner voice which always tells the truth and never betrays us, and by that test I agree to be tried without appeal; for I am sure that you will forgive me, señora—I am sure that you will extend your hand to me and tell me that I have saved you from a terrible misdeed, from a crime, perhaps, and have rescued you from yourself."

While I spoke I sought her hand, and, after a certain amount of resistance, it was abandoned to my grasp.

"Señora," I resumed, with accents of conviction which appeared to have a great effect upon her, "I counselled you but now to ask your heart. But do not that . . . no! . . . your heart is not concerned in all this . . . no . . . you can never have deliberately wished that young Maria, who has never harmed you, should be stricken on the very day after her marriage, and that through the affection which should have afforded the happiness of her whole life . . . no . . . you never really had the intention of destroying her illusions and her peace for ever. Some spirit of evil possessed you, you were not yourself . . . you were carried away unwittingly upon a downward path which would have led you straight to a precipice. When once your jealousy had passed away, you would have said, 'What have I done?' and in those simple words

you would have found matter for a whole lifetime of regret and repentance . . . or I would rather say of remorse."

"Oh, monsieur," cried Nerina, coming to sit nearer to me, as if she were seized by sudden terror, "you are right, again and again you are right . . . my jealousy made me blind and cruel. . . . But for you I should have committed a crime, and the misery I should have caused would have relentlessly recoiled upon myself! I thank you . . . I thank you!"

Then she suddenly collected herself and said:

"And yet if you knew how he has betrayed me!"

"I can divine, señora, in what way Antonio has wronged you. . . . But Maria—what can you allege against her?"

"Nothing, 'tis true. The poor child is entirely innocent. It would have been a crime to . . ."

Nerina's eyes were full of tears.

"Come," I said to her, "compose yourself. Remember that the mischief is completely remedied. Maria will be happy, and Antonio believes in your generosity. He will bless you for it. . . ."

"And I . . . I," replied Nerina sombrely, "I can but curse him still!"

"Why so? Hitherto, señora, I have but spoken of the interests of Maria and Antonio. Permit me also to speak of yours. When I see how fair you are, it becomes my turn to suffer at the thought of your enduring such bitter grief. But what, señora,

is love in your view if it brings those who seek it to such terrible extremities ? ”

“ Love,” she said, “ is the forgetting of everything.”

“ Above all, the forgetting of hatred,” I answered earnestly, “ and that is just what I wished to remind you of. I would have you, *señora*, abandon the miserable anxieties of the diseased passion which we call jealousy, and which attacks life at its very source. Jealousy is doubly poisonous, a draught that kills both those who take and those who give it. To be jealous of one another is to choose to die by inches. Trust alone can renew the fire which sinks each day towards extinction, and sinks the quicker in proportion as it has burned the more ardently. . . . And now, *señora*, shall I speak to you of that heavy hour which time seldom fails to bring even upon the tenderest and most devoted love ? Those who loved each other love each other no longer . . . what can be done in such a case, what hope is there ? Can you give back life to a corpse ? Would you try to strike a spark from a handful of snow, or of ice ? ’Tis impossible. Nature allows it not, and Venus herself would but waste her efforts in such an endeavour. Do I mean by this that you must renounce, Nerina, what is the very essence of your life here, your conquests, your gentle coquetries, love itself ? No. When a woman is beautiful, shapely, accomplished like yourself, Nerina, she is a

priestess who cannot desert her altar without committing a crime. One man is ungrateful and leaves you, but there are a thousand who adore you, and one man's folly should not prevent you from listening to the petitions of a thousand others. I do not make you the equal of men, Nerina, for you are their absolute mistress, their queen, and this very power of yours, this unbounded dominion, should prompt you to show tenderness, clemency or pity, according to the occasion. Besides, has Antonio in leaving you done you so great a wrong? Do you think you are less fair since his betrayal?"

"Hold your peace," said Nerina, trying to release her hand from my grasp. "You have recourse to flattery to convince me, and it is a poison that I hate . . . I do not trust you."

"If I told you you were ugly, you would accuse me for an imposter, and there you would be right. I would rather flatter you a little than lie to you impudently."

"Well, let us speak no more of my beauty."

"So be it . . . 'tis a subject that your ears can scarce ever escape from. And I would fain pass for something better than an echo of other men's words. So allow me . . ."

"Nay! I would only have you know that I forgive you . . . more, that I thank you."

"You are an angel . . ."

"But, I pray you, leave me now."

Scarcely had she uttered these last two words when a noise we heard in the passage made us start. Someone stopped before the door, and we heard a voice whisper :

“Señora, señora !”

I shivered from top to toe. Had Antonio proved weak after all? . . . Such was the first thought that crossed my mind. But I was soon reassured.

“Who is it?” Nerina had asked.

“It is I, Valentio; I am going my round like a prudent householder, before I get to bed. My round, señora, will not have been quite useless, for I see you have left the key in the lock . . . eh! these young women . . . they never think! I cannot guarantee you against robbers, for the good town of Barcelona has a very bad reputation that way. Are you in bed, señora?”

At first she hesitated; but, being taken unawares, and knowing not what to answer, she stammered at random :

“Yes, Señor Valentio, and I was even beginning to fall asleep. You have roused me again.”

“Oh, I am sorry, indeed,” said Valentio, “and I beg your pardon. But at your age broken sleep is soon cured. See . . . I will disturb you as little as possible; I will only give the key a turn, and if you have need of anything, you have but to pull the bell-pull that is close by the mirror. I wish you pleasant dreams, señora. Good-night!”

Valentio fitted the action to the words. He double-locked the door, and withdrew.

Nerina found not a word to say.

As for me, I was not at all displeased by what Señor Valentio had done, and inwardly rejoiced over it without too clear an idea why I did so.

I do not know if my quick-witted companion divined the almost impertinent sentiment which had glided into my mind, but I am bound to say that she made no sign of satisfaction or of fear, but merely gave vent to a little sigh that seemed to convey vexation rather than any other feeling.

A sigh!

And nothing more!

It was an interesting subject for reflection to a keen and perspicacious mind. How many suppositions and conjectures could I not build upon it!

However, I will do myself the justice of saying that I indulged in none at all, and this course was the least prejudicial of all to Nerina's honour and good name. I adopted a truly exemplary reserve, and only thought of holding conduct worthy of a man of dignity.

However, my temperament was always ardent, and carried me, in spite of the virtuous struggles of my conscience, much further than I wished. . . . In vain did I keep a tight hand, as it were, on my imagination; I felt it getting beyond my control; I felt I was being hurried towards a precipice, first

at a walk, then at a run, then I was breathless, and knew not where I should stop. And I even desired, may Heaven forgive me, to go as far as possible and only stop at the last possible moment.

These disquieting tendencies suddenly made me reflect in all seriousness. There was a kind of inward warning which told me that I was on the verge of a danger, and counselled prudence and moderation.

For a few minutes I reflected on the best and noblest things that can be thought of, such as the greatest philosophers of all ages have recommended us to study and remember. The respect due to hospitality was uppermost in my mind, and to my glory I may say that I was very much shaken at the moment by that important consideration.

Then, again, I thought of Antonio, Antonio whose hand I had pressed, who had prayed me to render him a little service, though he did not wish that I should push my obligingness thus far !

Antonio had reposed confidence in me, he had relied upon my honour, and he counted on my loyalty.

I was not afraid to aver that I had never found myself in so delicate and embarrassing a position.

Antonio was, in fact, the strongest obstacle to my vague designs, after the probable resistance of Nerina ; he was the real difficulty. He stood between her and me, for though he had very definitely preferred his

wife to his mistress, her heart was sure to cherish some remnants of the love whereof the last embers could scarcely be extinguished yet.

Besides, the human heart is so made that it tends, by a last impulse of instinct, to those things from which it has voluntarily dissociated itself, and memory urges it towards that happiness which it has itself surrendered. I had experienced this feeling often enough to avoid mistaking it in others, and I was certain that Antonio, whose passions were as ardent as the Spanish sky, was no stranger to it. Beyond all question he had bestowed full powers upon me, but it had not entered his head that I should seek to impose tribute on the rebellious country of which I was to undertake the pacifying.

A secret prompting told me that my designs were blameworthy, and that some day or other I should have to answer before the deities of love for this indelicate and felonious act, or, to put it more plainly, for this profanation.

Tormented by these thoughts, I was trembling and hesitating. Now egged on by my desires, now checked by my scruples, I ran the risk of appearing like those persons of the antique time whom some angry god changed, with miraculous swiftness, into a marble statue or a granite rock; and I assure you that such a transformation would not have been according to my mind. . . .

To anyone who has been able to form a clear view

of my disposition it will be plain that my conscience would capitulate. And that was what happened.

For that matter, 'tis the only kind of capitulation I have ever had to reproach myself with.

And even now it needed a strong combination of circumstances to make me lose my head and lead me into the paths of treason.

Besides, I had no lack of excellent arguments to prove to my own mind that Antonio could not take it amiss.

Antonio seemed to me a very bright fellow. . . .

Well, between men of understanding, is there not some means of coming to an agreement ?

Again, was I not rendering him a very true service by rendering a reconciliation between him and Señora de Xenarez impossible ?

This last reason seemed to me conclusive.

So without more ado I defied the bogies that thronged my path, as if they would prevent my taking my course resolutely, and I plunged onward towards the unknown.

My body working in harmony with my thoughts, I took a step forward.

Nerina gave vent to a little cry of alarm.

"Where are you going ?"

"I do not know."

"Why are you coming towards me ?"

"I did not mean it."

"Please collect your thoughts and retire."

"You dismiss me!"

"No, but I wish you to go away . . . that is all."

"To go away!"

"Of course."

"And how?"

"How you will, so that you quit me at once."

"But did not you hear what the worthy Señor Valentio said?"

"Yes."

"Well, you must know, señora, that we are prisoners . . . prisoners, and nothing else. . . . I beg you to weigh well what the word means. . . ."

"It matters not, you cannot remain here."

"If I cannot remain, it is very clear that I must go, for there is no middle course. But is there another door?"

"No."

"Then what is to be done?"

"You must find some means."

"'Tis easy to tell me so."

"Can you find nothing for it?"

"There is only the window."

Nerina uttered an exclamation which went to my heart. . . . Sweet girl! she would not have me leap from the window—the window made her fear for me. I need not explain with what joy that exclamation filled my soul; it will easily be guessed. At the same moment I had thought of getting out by way of the chimney; but not only would it be a very

dirty way, but, when once I had gained the roof, I should only be the nearer to the same peril. I let the thought of the chimney drop in silence, and Nerina had not the gracelessness to suggest it to me. When she had convinced herself that retreat was absolutely impossible, at all events for the moment, we faced each other in silence.

The reader will agree that it was a new and strange situation.

My meeting with Nerina had begun with a sharp discussion. That had been prolonged by a veritable lesson in ethics. . . . And now we had to decide what ending was possible after the singular commencement.

The fair Nerina was probably seeking in her mind, like myself, for some creditable way to solve the riddle.

I know not what she looked for from me, but I on my side was dying of fear lest she should take it into her head to summon aid. Sometimes women have such strange ideas!

Fortunately, she did nothing of the kind.

We still kept silence.

Valentio's action had nonplussed her, for, do what she would, she could but own to herself that he had shut her like a bird in a cage, and it would be difficult for her to escape without leaving a little of her bright plumage on the bars.

She saw the danger in all its imminence and all its extent. Perhaps I saw it too. . . . But, without

vain-glorying, I may proclaim that, though I saw it . . . it did not frighten me.

At length the silence was broken.

Nerina, gathering courage, ventured on taking a step or two in my direction.

"Do you wish anything, señora?"

"Why?"

"You are coming towards me."

"The room is so small, that is what made you think so; but I am only walking because I am impatient."

"Are you angry, señora?"

"Have I not grounds for being angry?"

"Well . . . give your orders. . . . I swear I will obey you, that I may restore you to calm and repose."

"Well, show invention; use your imagination; find some way of going . . . and leave me."

Women are unintelligible! . . . Here was a curious example of the fact!

Furthermore, they fail to suspect, as may be seen.

Show invention! . . . Use my imagination! . . . Find some way of going, and leave her! Madame Nerina talked glibly of it, and I was tempted to ask her if she was of the stock of the fabled demigods, to whom nothing was impossible.

It was an admirable idea.

But, as must be agreed, it presented the most serious difficulties. With a little goodwill, the reader himself will discern them forthwith.

In the first place, the faculty of inventing, the gift of imagination, is not to be had for the asking. 'Tis a gift of the gods, and generally the gods are niggardly of these gifts. Not everyone who wills to do it can imagine and invent.

First, it must be thoroughly understood that I did not wish to imagine and invent. Never had my mind been more wilfully sterile.

I was determined to show myself barren of resource and void of expedients which might bring my imprisonment to an end, even though I thereby earned the reputation of a man without intelligence and ideas.

That mishap, I will frankly avow, would have mattered very little to me.

For the reputation which I sought to uphold with Madame Nerina had nothing directly or indirectly to do with it, and was not risked at all by my showing that I could not obey her. Quite a different matter was concerned.

So I paid no heed to this fresh order, though the motive for it was as clear as might be, and it had been given in a tone which, in the case of another man, perhaps, would have made any response impossible. But Nerina's will, though it had been expressed in even plainer terms, would never have carried me through a locked door or taught me how to leap out of window without breaking my back. That was a very threatening issue, and in truth, how-

ever concerned she might be for her honour, she could not desire to inflict death upon a man. In Spain virtue is certainly carried to this extreme, and I may say by the way that the Spaniards are perfectly right.

Such, at least, is the flattering illusion which it pleased me to cherish.

So I had to reply to the crude and impracticable order which had just been given to me by some conclusive reason. . . .

I slowly approached Nerina, and then with my hand on my heart, and with an air of profound conviction, I made my answer in the following terms :

“ Heaven is my witness,” I said, after a moment of silence, “ that I was about to withdraw, and that only necessity, overmastering and absolute necessity, prevents my obeying you. But have no fear, señora ; the room is not very large, ’tis true . . . but yet, with discretion and goodwill, I can so manage as not to derange your convenience overmuch. Here is a chair ; I shall sit in this corner, and turn my back to you. Finish your preparations for the night, and then to bed. You have my vow for it that I will not trouble you by a word or by an indiscreet glance.”

Perhaps this suggestion which I made to Nerina will surprise the reader ; for the description which I gave above of her costume might lead him to believe that she was already prepared for bed. But I had my reasons for acting as I did. When I had entered, I saw her nightdress of fine material hanging over the

back of a chair, in readiness for the putting-on. So it was my duty to accord to Nerina a minute or two of perfect freedom.

"No," she said, "no . . . I shall not go to bed; I shall put my dress on again."

Very good. I had not a syllable to say, and uttered none; but here again a difficulty arose. It was a ball dress, and an assistant's hand was needed to fasten the hooks. We were getting out of Scylla into Charybdis. Dangers were thickening around us. She had already taken up her dress, but now cast it from her with vexation.

"Have you no mantle or scarf?" said I, thus taking part, as it were, in the vexation which she seemed to feel.

"I have nothing; nothing at all," said she.

"Then, if you will take my advice, *señora*, you will retire to bed. I will seat myself in the chair near to you, and we will talk."

"To bed . . . to bed . . ." she muttered in a distrustful voice. "Well . . . if I must . . . take your place in that dark corner again, *monsieur*, and do not move."

I had not to be told twice. It was my business, first and foremost, to justify this sign of confidence in me. I rested my head against the wall . . . I kept perfectly quiet . . . I saw nothing.

And yet! . . . and yet . . . if I had chosen!

Anyhow, the devil refused to give up the whole of

his share in it, for I had not been ordered to stop my ears, and I cannot describe what agitation penetrated to the very depths of my soul by that channel. Her every movement betrayed itself by a little noise that sent a shiver through me, and evoked for my imagination what I was forbidden to admire with my eyes. The rustling of the material as it was spread out, the creaking of a chair on which she rested her foot, all these smallest trifles opened fairy worlds for me, where my thoughts leapt away, danced before me, and were lost.

The creaking of the bed was the close of this mysterious scene, and Nerina said to me :

“I have finished. You are free to move, sir.”

It was time; I was losing patience, and if I had had to hold myself in another minute, perhaps I should have broken my vow.

I cannot describe my ensuing sensations. The sight presented to my eyes would have inflamed the wisest and coldest man on earth. My blood is, no doubt, hotter than that of the Esquimaux, and began to beat violently in my veins. The moon was now full, and shed a clear white light within the room, suggesting to me the evening of a fine summer day. Nerina appeared before me in the full power of her charms, in the perfect expression of her graces and seductiveness. The soft bed was covered with a sheet only, as is the custom in Spain in the hot season, and her posture was so easy and natural that,

in spite of her intentions, which were the most innocent in the world, it would have been possible for a malicious mind to guess at the premeditated manœuvres of coquetry in what was a mere result of chance. The pretty head gently reclining on the snow-white pillow, one of the arms left without the sheet, the bosom half uncovered, the hair in some disarray; the legs, one of which was doubled beneath her, and thus helped to bring out the contour of her form, while the other, negligently stretched at length, disappeared in a kind of impalpable cloud, in a word, the whole of the graceful pose seemed to conspire to attack the reason and confound the finest plans that wisdom could weave.

Honour, delicacy, loyalty enjoined upon me the utmost discretion.

'Tis true . . . and yet the white bed, the smiling moon, the warm air, the deep silence, Nerina's beauty made me draw near to her mechanically, without weighing what I did, without meaning it; I took my place beside her, and sought her hand.

O prodigy . . . O bliss! The hand was not withdrawn.

The speeches of Demosthenes and Cicero, the most eloquent orations, the sublimest reasoning, are inexpressive in comparison with this simple contact, this sweet pressure.

Drawn as by an irresistible magnet, I slowly bent over her, so that I might follow beneath the rising

folds of the sheet the contours of certain charms of which the little I had already seen gave me but an imperfect foretaste. Once started upon this course, there is no stopping. With my hand which was free I cast aside those tiresome screens which had concealed so admirable a masterpiece of the Creator from me, and, thanks to my boldness, Nerina, whose fair form lying there calm and motionless might have been compared to a statue of Chastity or Modesty, became in my arms, warmed by my breath, a priestess of Venus, quivering with love and pleasure.

How could I explain this double intoxication, this double madness, whereof no obstacle nor scruple marred the irresistible sweep? How could I explain it? . . .

Fool that I am, can such madness, such intoxication, such bliss, be explained by words?

Women who are loved, you alone can solve these problems.

And if any insensate philosopher would seek to reason out these too subtle matters, his mouth should be stopped by a kiss.

Then perchance he would understand—and hold his peace. . . .

CHAPTER LV

Day dawns—The slumbers of Nerina—The ladder—The dining-room—The wedding party—Compliments to the married pair—Generosity of Nerina—I leave for Madrid—A visit to the Pardo, to La Sarsuela, to Buen-Retiro, and to Aranjuez—I am bored—I am anxious to see France once more—Serious difficulties—A good idea—Bertaut buys me a jar—I leave—Dull and fatiguing journey—My secret arrival at Versailles—I stop at La Tour-Roquelaure—His surprise—The King is annoyed with me—A visit from three angry women—Mesdames de Fosseuse, de Comminges, and d'Uxelles—Warm explanations—The reputation of Madame de Montglas is ill-defended—La Tour acknowledges that he is an impertinent and fatuous fool—The three women are routed—I breakfast well to get my courage up—A strange expedition—I get a cart to carry me to the park of Versailles—Astonishment of the populace at sight of my turn-out—Shouts of laughter—I do not flinch—My friends think me mad—The halt in the middle of the park—I am seen by Louis XIV.—His annoyance—They send Candale to me—My respectful excuses—Certain proof of my obedience—The soil of Spain—I am pardoned.

AT break of day, I opened Nerina's window, and measured with my eyes the distance to the ground. It was about twenty feet. But to my right there was a roof, which halved the distance, and which I could get to easily by clinging to a bar from which hung a pulley by which hay was drawn up into the

attic. Thence it would be easy for me to reach the garden by a ladder which the groom had forgotten to remove from the wall.

Nerina slept. . . . I took care not to wake her, for her smiling mouth made me fancy that she was at the beginning or end of a pleasant dream.

After having made sure that I had left no trace behind me in the room of the handsome Aragonese, I set to to get out through the balcony, and my descent, though fairly dangerous, was effected without accident.

As soon as my foot touched the ground, I made sure that nobody had watched, and I ran and hid in that same grove where, the evening before, I had overheard the strange conversation between Nerina and Antonio Carral.

I had just then received some letters from France, which had remained in my doublet. I read them over again to pass the time, when a great movement, which could be heard in every part of the house, let me know that people were beginning to get up.

Then, no longer fearing to be noticed, I ran to my room. I caused a fictitious disorder there, which was absolutely needful to make Valentio's people think I had passed the night there.

The bed, above all, I thoroughly disarranged, that there should be no doubt of my supposed sojourn in it. No sooner was this over, than I betook myself to the dining-room. Everybody was there already, and

Valentio had caused a most appetising collation to be served.

Before sitting down, everybody paid their compliments to the bride and bridegroom, who looked as a pair should look under such circumstances, that is to say, slightly flushed, rather embarrassed, and with tired eyes.

As for me, I looked for Nerina and could not see her. Suddenly the door opened and she appeared.

Antonio could not master a sort of fear, which betrayed itself by a sudden pallor.

As for me, I had thorough confidence in Nerina, as I saw her draw near without avoiding Maria.

She walked straight up to the bride, took her hand, and, kissing her on the forehead, said :

“ Be happy, sweet and handsome child. You may believe that no one will pray more ardently to God, the Virgin, and the saints for your eternal happiness than I shall.”

Then, turning towards Antonio and favouring him with an affectionate gesture, in which there was a little coldness, she said :

“ These wishes are also for you, Señor Antonio. Receive them as a happy augury ; for they come from a heart which does not ignore the evil which may be caused by hatred, but which knows still better the joys love can yield.”

Everybody applauded Nerina's words, without thoroughly understanding them. Antonio partly comprehended ; to me alone her meaning is plain.

I passed another week at Barcelona. My relations with Nerina continued, but they were so well concealed, so scrupulously secret, that not a word was said in the quarter where I lodged, which may be said in passing, did not lack curious gossipers or babbling barbers.

Though that week has left delightful reminiscences, I am not going to give a list of them here.

The reader will be able, I fancy, to supplement by his imagination whatever may seem to be incomplete in this part of my tale; and to leave Master Nunez, the innkeeper, Valentio, my amiable host, Antonio Carral and his young bride Maria, and the beautiful Nerina, in order to follow me to Madrid, where my patience and my duty called me at the same time.

I had really, or, at all events, I was supposed to have, a mission to fulfil at Madrid. Créqui had forwarded me letters for various personages in Spain; but I soon saw, from the way in which these letters were given me, that there was nothing very important in the whole matter, and that I need not trouble myself very much about it. This is why I had no scruple to stop some days at Barcelona, though my stay had not been settled beforehand in my itinerary.

I arrived at Madrid in the middle of a thick cloud of yellow dust. When I asked the cause of this abominable annoyance, I was told that it had not rained for a week, and that people were accustomed,

at that period of drought, to see the city itself, which is built upon sand, disappear in these frightful whirlwinds. This did not prevent my visiting the most important sights and the suburbs of this ancient city, among others, the *Buen-Retiro*, the *Pardo*, the *Sarsuela* and *Aranjuez*.

Whatever was the cause, quite contrary to my expectations, I was soon bored in Madrid. Apart from the evening entertainments, which seemed to me delightful, I felt myself soon fatigued with the fastidious etiquette of the court. Perhaps, also, the obligation which I was under to remain in Spain helped to render my stay insupportable to me. A week after my arrival, I was seized with an inexplicable desire to retrace my steps and return to France.

But how to manage it? Créqui had made me clearly comprehend the dangers which awaited me on my return. The king had spoken, and to incur the king's anger was no trifling thing, above all when that king was named Louis XIV.

On the other side, boredom did not suit me, and, on account of my character, which everyone knows, it was a disorder from which I might die; the position was difficult to endure. On both sides there were imminent dangers and insurmountable obstacles.

I racked my brains, and reviewed in turn the following various plans :

“Should I write a petition to the king?”

Anyone could do that, and Roquelaure should not resemble the common herd.

"Should I ask one of my friends to plead my cause?"

Has one friends at the distance of three hundred leagues?

That's a difficult question, which I should not presume to answer. Being in doubt, I refrain.

"Should I draw up a memorial in my own favour?"

Pooh! that would have been interfering with some lawyer's rights, an idea which did not please me.

I set myself to reflect on and to weigh well the king's words as they had been transmitted to me by M. de Créqui.

Suddenly I smote my forehead and shouted for Bertaut, my own man.

"What does his Grace desire?"

"Be good enough to buy me a jar."

"A jar!"

"Yes . . . a jar."

"I beg your pardon, your Grace, I don't . . ."

"You don't know what a jar is?"

"Certainly, monseigneur."

"Well, then, go and get me one."

"Of what size, your Grace?"

"The highest and largest you can find."

"Certainly, I understand."

"Ah! one word more; you must get a bung for it. I must be able to close it hermetically."

"I will obtain a bung."

Bertaut made his exit, while I rubbed my hands with satisfaction. He was not long gone, and returned bringing the desired object. By my faith, it was a very fine jar, thoroughly suited to the purpose for which I destined it. I joyfully took possession of it, and rushed into the little garden belonging to my lodgings. Bertaut made as though he would accompany me, but a sign from me stopped him. Thus I made him understand that I had no need for his services.

"His Grace requires nothing more?"

"Certainly I do. In half-an-hour I want to jump into a good post-chaise drawn by five horses, and to be rattled away to the Pyrenees."

"Monseigneur is returning to France?"

"To Paris."

Bertaut was a very smart and zealous young fellow. He was but half-an-hour late, and really that was not very much. An hour after my order was given, the mules were pawing the ground in front of my windows, and the repeated crackings of the whip formed the most delicious tune which could sound in the ears of a man who was anxious to escape the place he detested! . . . I departed, but I took care to take my jar with me.

Although I found real pleasure in escaping dull

Madrid, I was in a state of mind so full of doubt that the journey wearied me. I found the roads full of ruts, the inns detestable, and all my hostesses, without exception, frightfully ugly.

Would that I had been permitted to cross the three hundred leagues in a single stride. I do not want to let one splash of the mud that my ill-humour threw about in every direction fall upon the reader. It is sufficient to say that after many annoyances, which caused me to lose patience, more than once, I managed to creep one beautiful warm morning into Versailles. I proceeded immediately to hide myself in a little lodging where La Tour-Roquelaure generally lived at those periods when his creditors became too importunate, thus causing him to lead a very retired life. He happened to be there on my arrival, and gave a shout of astonishment.

"Has the king permitted you to return?" he cried.

"Not a bit of it."

"Mazarin has written to you?"

"Not he."

"Does the queen-mother know of your arrival?"

"Not in the least."

"Well, then, you are lost; here everyone looks on you as simply exiled."

"I can not be exiled when I am here."

"Take care they do not send you back to the place from whence you came."

"That would be very interesting."

"Things more astonishing than that have taken place."

"We will await the result; but, first of all, give me some breakfast."

La Tour caused me to be served immediately. But, before sitting down to table, I had to assist at a scene which was as original as it was unexpected. It was announced to La Tour that three ladies had arrived in a coach and had insisted on seeing him. "They are," said the footman, "Mesdames de Fosseuse, de Comminges, and d'Uxelles."

"Merciful heavens," cried La Tour.

"What is it all about?"

"The fact is that these female devils have been unworthily betrayed by me, and that they have arrived in a body with the intention of knocking me into little pieces; they will not leave a bit of me unbeaten."

"Do not be too sure of that; they must be seen, they must be heard."

"A fine sight and a pretty shallahballah," sighed my cousin La Tour in a melancholy manner. "Well, since it has to be done, let them come in."

The three ladies made their appearance.

Each of the three had the ferocious air of the Horatii advancing upon the Curiatii. They only wanted a javelin each; there was in their piercing eye a something which served them instead of a war-

sword, the blows of which are sometimes no less mortal.

I bowed at their approach, for I knew all three of them. But they paid very little attention to me. It was evident that they had other affairs on their minds.

"Monsieur de La Tour," said Madame d'Uxelles, "we have decided—Madame de Comminges, de Fosseuse, and I, on a plan which at first may seem strange; it is easily explained when one knows its object. We three are come to tell you the truth about yourself."

La Tour bowed, as he said: "You take too much trouble, ladies, and you have chosen your moment badly, because, as you see, I am not alone. My cousin Gaston, Duke of Roquelaure, will be a forced witness to this interview, because, unfortunately, I have only this room to offer you here . . . and, without doubt, you do not wish your explanation to take place before him."

"Monsieur de Roquelaure's presence has nothing to do with the matter," said Madame de Comminges. "Were the king himself present in person I should say my say. . . . Monsieur de La Tour, you are a braggart!"

"An impertinent person!" added Madame d'Uxelles.

"A fool!" said Madame de Fosseuse, in conclusion.

"What have I done to bring down upon me such a shower of compliments," demanded La Tour, timidly.

"Yesterday," answered Madame d'Uxelles, "not later than yesterday, at the Countess of Fiesque's house, you allowed it to be understood that Madame de Montglas had . . . shown you certain favours."

"If my words had been twisted into a sense which they did not possess," said La Tour, "is it my fault?"

"Your words were but too clear," cried Madame d'Uxelles. "We have promised that poor lady, whom you so unworthily outraged, to obtain from you a formal signed declaration, by which you will declare that you have never kissed anything but Madame de Montglas' finger-tips."

"It isn't much," murmured La Tour.

"The declaration has been prepared beforehand," added Madame d'Uxelles, taking from her bosom a roll of perfumed paper. "Here it is. You have but to put your name to it, and the wrong will thus be righted."

"I ask your pardon," said La Tour, "but I do not quite understand what you want me to do. If I was wrong in saying a foolish thing, there is no reason why I should sign a lie."

"A lie!" cried Mesdames de Fosseuse and de Comminges, both at once.

"You persist in calumniating Madame de Mont-

glas?" asked Madame d'Uxelles, crossing her arms upon her chest in a tragic manner.

"I do not calumniate her," observed La Tour, I . . ."

"Have you any proofs?" demanded Madame d'Uxelles triumphantly.

La Tour remained silent for an instant. The three women thought their victory complete. Things were looking black.

"Have you any proofs?" said Madame de Comminges—"anything in writing? If only a letter!"

"The proofs! the proofs!" repeated Madame de Fosseuse, clapping her hands.

I gazed attentively at La Tour, and I looked upon him as thoroughly conquered.

"Ladies," he answered at last, after thinking deeply, "you have proved to me that I am a fool, an impertinent person, a fatuous boaster, and, besides that, an idiot. But calm yourselves, I will change my behaviour. The first time that one of you ladies wishes to sleep with me, I will beg her to let me know beforehand in her own writing, and fully signed, without which I shall be contented to be her very humble and respectful servant."

This answer so much astonished these three females, that they all fled from the room without a "with your leave" or "by your leave." When the noise of their coach let us know they were too far off to hear us, La Tour and I burst into fits of laughter.

I had a tremendous appetite. I did full honour to La Tour's *déjeuner*.

Afterwards, the hour of noon having struck, I asked him if he would accompany me on the expedition I had resolved to make in order to try and obtain pardon from Louis XIV.

"I ask no better," said he; "but won't you explain to me first? . . ."

"I can explain nothing to you. To do so would be to compromise you. You will remain a simple looker-on; and I alone shall be responsible for success or failure."

He consented to all that I wished, simply looking on at my preparations without attempting to understand them.

I began by going to a farmer who cultivated an enormous piece of ground at the side of the road from Paris to Versailles. There I chose a cart which the good man used for the carriage of manure. I begged him to clean it as well as possible, to harness a horse to it, and to lend me a waggoner to drive it. The farmer obeyed for the sake of a piece of gold which I handed to him, when I began to propose my plan. The cart was brought to my cousin La Tour's door.

I went back to the outer room, where Bertaut had just before placed one of my valises. I opened it with care and took from it a jar which was hermetically sealed. The jar was big enough to hold three litres of water. I took it up very carefully and put it in the

cart, after which I got in myself, to La Tour's great astonishment, who, bursting with laughter, asked me what was in the jar, and whither I meant going in my extraordinary equipage.

"To the park of Versailles," said I calmly to the waggoner.

And with one kick I broke the jar, whence poured out a black mould, so fine and without mixture, that it might have been taken for tobacco.

That was my only answer to him. The horse started off, and I passed through the town, standing holding on to the two wooden rails of the tumbrel, looking as proud and upright as a Roman emperor.

It must be understood I put on my newest and richest suit.

La Tour, who followed me at a distance of a hundred paces, was thoroughly puzzled; at two or three different times I saw him beckon me as though begging me to return.

But my mind was made up.

The street-boys formed quite a crowd behind me; if it was not a brilliant one, it was at least a large one. People whispered, laughed, shouted, and pointed me out. Some people having recognised me, my name was shouted by the crowd, and, as they already knew me for a rather whimsical personage, they came without difficulty to the conclusion that I had become an absolute madman.

Some pitied me. Others looked upon the affair

as a very amusing one, and rushed off to tell their friends.

I arrived thus in the centre of the park.

Here the crowd had become so thick that the cart advanced with difficulty. I had distinguished, in the ever increasing multitude that surrounded me, Vardès, M. d'Humières, Cheverny, the Count de Fiesque and many others, who, talking excitedly among themselves, said that if I had not gone mad altogether, I could not fail to sleep in the Bastille, for that the king did not even allow my name to be mentioned. I took two or three turns round the ornamental water, taking no notice of what was said or done around me.

At last, exactly what I desired happened.

A rumour of the affair came to the ears of the king, and His Majesty sent M. de Candale to speak with me.

"Your Grace," said this chance ambassador, who had had great difficulty in pushing his way to my cart, "the king has charged me to recall to your mind his royal wishes, and I am to ask you by what insolent caprice you have dared to disobey the orders which His Majesty has no remembrance of having revoked."

"It is true," I replied to M. de Candale, "that the king has expressed to me his wishes, and that he gave certain orders which I was bound to obey without a murmur. Be good enough then, duke, to return

to His Majesty and to tell him that, as long as I live, and in whatever circumstances I may find myself, I shall profess for His Majesty the most scrupulous, the most absolute obedience."

"But at this very moment," replied the duke, "your conduct is a most striking denial of the principles of which you have just boasted, because here you are in France, when you ought to be submitting with silence and resignation to the exile to which you have been condemned."

"Let us understand each other, duke," replied I with the greatest calmness. "His Majesty ordered me to tread on no other earth than that of Spain. Now deign, I beg you, to cast your eye on the floor of my cart and on this broken jar. It contained excellent Spanish earth, which I have carefully brought back from Madrid, and on which, as you see, I stand at the present moment. So long as the king does not discharge me from the sacred trust which his will has fixed upon me, I shall remain in this fatiguing and respectful attitude. Go then, your Grace, and inform His Majesty of my position, and in case he is not touched with my submissiveness, I will take post-horses and return to the frontier. I have nothing more to say."

The Duc de Candale tried to hide a strong desire to laugh, and returned to the palace.

Five minutes after, I was pardoned, and I found myself in the midst of my old friends, happy indeed

to see them once more, still more happy to know that I was free, and quite ready, notwithstanding the little injustice of which I had been the victim, to give my sovereign every possible proof of my obedience, love, and devotion.

CHAPTER LVI

Louis XIV. and Mademoiselle Herminie de Kermouan—Portrait of her uncle—A true Breton—The sharp-sightedness of the Baron de Kermouan—The means by which he tries to save his niece—I am charged to bring Mademoiselle Herminie to the King's ball—I arrive at the old baron's at nine o'clock—My reception—A frank question is asked—Mademoiselle Herminie becomes very red—An experiment proposed by her uncle—The reading of a manuscript, to which Mademoiselle Herminie and I pay particular attention.

SOME time after the rupture between Louis XIV. and Mademoiselle de La Vallière, a certain Demoiselle Herminie de Kermouan arrived at the court, from the depths of Brittany; she was a very marvel of beauty. The king saw her and became violently enamoured of her. He went to considerable expense on her account, and may have thought for an instant that he had bought the young girl's heart. But her uncle, for she had neither father nor mother, was not the man to fill the part which it might have been wished that he should play. He was one of those Bretons of the old school, to whom honour is everything, and who would die rather than allow their blazon to be besmirched by the slightest stain. In addition to this, he had sharp eyes, keen ears, and was very intelligent.

He was a man to deceive whom would be very difficult.

The old Baron de Kermouan soon perceived the assiduities, the attentions and little compliments of His Majesty. He decided to put a stop to the thing at once. The beautiful Herminie seemed to find a pleasure in these gallantries, though she did not thoroughly understand their meaning. The baron looked well after his niece, knowing her to be honest at heart, with a well-placed pride and really religious. He resolved to make an appeal to her heart in order to save her from herself, and by clearly showing her her danger, not to be obliged afterwards to reproach himself with having allowed her to sin through ignorance.

This is how he set himself to attain his purpose.

One evening there was a court ball. I had been selected to escort Mademoiselle Herminie from her home in one of the royal coaches.

"Be punctual," said the Baron de Kermouan to me; "I shall expect you at nine o'clock."

I was there to the minute. It was striking nine when I arrived at the Baron de Kermouan's lodgings.

He was seated in an easy chair by the fire, his feet resting on one of the andirons. Herminie, in full ball costume, occupied a sofa on the other side of the fireplace.

"Zounds!" said the baron, on seeing me enter, "I am glad, Monsieur de Roquelaure, to see you so

early, because, before you set out for Versailles, I must have a little conversation with my dear niece, a conversation in which I trust you will take part, and at the end of which Mademoiselle Herminie de Kermouan can, as she pleases, go to the royal ball or jump into a postchaise in order to return to Brittany. I leave her perfectly free to decide the matter."

"What," answered I . . . "can Mademoiselle Herminie, after what you are going to tell her, possibly renounce the delightful evening where she is so impatiently awaited? . . ."

"By His Majesty, eh?" asked M. de Kermouan, in a singular tone.

I did not answer. Herminie became very red, and the baron continued in the following terms:

"I do not like beating about the bush, Monsieur de Roquelaure, and already, before your arrival, I had placed the question before my niece in the clearest language. I have pointed out to her that she is on a dangerous path. . . . I have told her of the position that will be offered her . . . the mistress of a king . . ."

"Baron!"

"Oh! I know what I say, duke, and I must beg you not to interrupt me. Yes, His Majesty Louis XIV. loves my dear Herminie, and, as he cannot marry her, I fancy that he wishes to confer upon her one of those equivocal distinctions at which an honest woman ought to blush, whatever may be the sham honours attached

to that degrading elevation. . . . But, pardon me, duke, excuse the solemnity of the terms which I employ, which might make you think that I am excited or that I exceed the limits of simple observations by which I desire that my well-beloved niece shall profit. I have jotted down on paper, from well-attested documents, the history of a poor woman who was also seized by that foolish and dangerous desire to seat herself upon the steps of the throne, and to reign over her king. Allow me to read this fragment, duke, and, when my good Herminie has listened to it, she will be free to obey either the suggestions of pleasure or the voice of reason ; she shall follow, according to her sovereign will, that path her fancy may indicate ; and, whatever may happen then, I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that I have fulfilled my duty and thoroughly accomplished my mission."

Doubtless my eyes expressed my surprise. The old baron said with a smile :

"My sharp-sightedness astonishes you, duke. What would you ! I am an eccentric, and I allow myself liberties which are possibly not permitted at court. I cling to my honour and to that of my family. Everyone has his little fancies. . . . That is mine."

"But you do not consider," said I, "that your suspicions may be looked upon as an insult to the king, and that I . . ."

"I esteem you too much, Monsieur de Roquelaure," he quickly replied, "to suppose that you have the least knowledge of His Majesty's intentions in regard to my niece. It is just because I believe you to be a stranger to this intrigue that I have confided to you my fears, and that I desire that you should be a witness to the resolution which it may shortly please my niece to take in the interest of her fortune and her future."

"So be it, baron; I respect your scruples too much to condemn them. I am absolutely at your orders."

"S'blood! it won't take long. My dear niece has always been fond of stories, and the one I am about to relate may influence the rest of her life. In listening to it she will do well to remember that there are standing in the courtyard two carriages ready. The one will take her, if it so pleases her, to the ball at the palace of Versailles; the other will bear her at full speed towards Brittany, if she should will it so."

"Uncle," said Herminie gravely, "I am ready to listen."

The Baron de Kermouan, having opened a manuscript, written in his own handwriting, commenced as follows:

"On a fine day in the year 1526, my dear Herminie, there was a great fête at Mont-de-Marsan. The windows were hung with carpets and flags, the streets were full of an immense crowd of sightseers, and the

waters of the Midouze, one of those rivers which fall into the Adour, were covered by a multitude of skiffs flying innumerable streamers of every shape and colour.

“An important ceremony was about to take place.

“The king, Francis I., had returned to France after the captivity caused by the fatal day of Pavia, and his mother, the Duchess of Angoulême, whose hands had held the sceptre during his absence, had come nearly two hundred leagues to meet him on his return.

“The two courts, which were shortly to be but one, had met upon a daïs of cloth of gold, magnificently embroidered with flowers and precious stones, setting forth the arms of the royal house of France. The bells were pealing, and the two glittering hedges, formed on either side of the court by the partisans and halberds of the archers, were a fine sight.

“At a given signal, two velvet curtains, which had been placed at either end of the royal tent, were slowly drawn aside, and we saw the meeting of the mother and son.

“The Duchess of Angoulême had suffered, and the traces of her painful past could be seen on her face, traces which her present joy did not entirely efface.

“As for Francis I., he had preserved even in prison his gay, careless, and adventurous character. To him this sad episode was but, in a way, an original chapter in the romance of his life. He

hoped, brave and presumptuous as he was, to have his day of revenge, a glorious revenge, for which his enemies should pay the piper. These hopes, joined to the pleasure of having regained his liberty, made the king radiant, and the smiles on the royal face soon passed to the faces of the courtiers, and were the sign for shouts of enthusiasm and loud cheering.

“ ‘Long live the king !’ they cried on every side.

“ ‘France for ever !’ answered the king.

“ And at the same time he stretched out his arms towards his mother, and she strained him to her breast for several seconds.

“ After this first outburst of emotion, caused by filial and maternal love, the king gazed around him slowly and scrutinizingly. The inspection seemed to have satisfied him, if one might judge from the smile that appeared upon his lips. In fine, he found his court just as he had left it, brilliant, numerous, and enthusiastic. The misfortunes of the crown had taken away nothing of his glory, and he saw reopen before him that career, which had been unfortunately interrupted, of worldly pleasures, of chivalrous successes, and of warlike triumphs to which he had been accustomed.

“ He gave himself up with delight to the joys which his just pride felt in this new and marvellous spectacle of delights.

“ We will pass lightly over the ceremony by which the town did honour to the arrival of its beloved king.

The golden keys had been presented to him with great pomp outside the walls, and were brought back to the Hôtel de Ville by the alderman, where a banquet was prepared at great expense, worthy of the two illustrious guests who were to be entertained there. Night had already begun to fall when the king and his mother sat down to the banquet, and there were illuminations and bonfires in every street and alley of Mont-de-Marsan. . . . The return of Francis I. was in reality a popular rejoicing. You would have said that France, captive and desolate the while her master had been a prisoner, simultaneously with him had shaken off her chains and recovered her liberty.

“That night there was a reception. All the nobility of the country around had been presented to the king and the queen-mother, who looked at everything from the serious side, while her son saw nothing but the most frivolous one, waited with impatience for this necessary ceremony to end in order to be alone with the king and to converse with him about the lofty destinies to which he was henceforward called. Many a time she had had long conversations with the chiefs of the faithful nobility of the province, and each time she had begged her son to give her the advantage of his presence and the assistance of his ideas. But the chivalrous king had something better to do that evening than to trouble himself with politics. Charming women struggled

for a word, and the royal smile and the compliments which he distributed right and left were scrambled for with pride.

“The Duchess looked at him and sighed.

“He is always the same, she thought, a prison has not cured him.

“An instant afterwards, as she said aloud to her son that which she had just thought, he answered her, while smiling into a mirror which told him that he would find it easy to please :

“ ‘Mother mine, what would you have? Happiness is but an illness, and should I not deserve to be called Francis the Fool if I tried to cure myself of being happy? ’

“The preoccupation of Francis as he said the words did not escape his mother. She looked hard at him and saw that his eyes were directed with a sort of involuntary persistence upon a handsome young girl who was one of her maids of honour, and whose name was Anne d’Heilly. This delicious creature was of excellent family, for she belonged to the noble house of Dreux, who had the blood royal in their veins, and her beauty equalled her nobility. Tall, graceful, with an excessively white skin, her large eyes were sparkling, and she feared no rival at the court. As she was as intelligent as she was beautiful, she was not the last to perceive the killing glances of the king, and, perhaps because the demon of ambition already spoke to her in secret, perhaps because she was led

on by a movement of sympathy, she could not help feeling joy and satisfaction in thus distancing the other well-known beauties who were present.

“After the *médianoche* there was dancing, and during the ballet, which, according to the custom of the time, was grave and formal, the king danced with Mademoiselle d’Heilly several times. Never did ardent lover see his love under more favourable auspices. The joy which as a matter of form reigned upon every brow favoured the secret happiness of two hearts only too anxious to understand each other. Before the end of the evening the mute language of eyes and hands had been perfectly understood; and when the hour of departure came, the clear-sighted bystanders were certain that Mademoiselle d’Heilly would find a seat in the royal coach.

“And so it was, and the princess, the king’s mother, made no opposition . . . she knew that her son’s passions were merely increased by resistance and obstacles, and she was also tolerant enough to think that with a man of the temperament of Francis the interest of his policy and his heart could be identical.

“It was at daybreak that the royal carriages were crowded beneath the balconies of the Hôtel de Ville, in order to receive and transmit towards the capital of France the king, who had at length come back to his crown and his subjects. The constable of Montmorency and Duprat the chancellor knelt down so as

to serve as a step to Francis when he got into his coach amidst the cheers of the crowd.

“The turn of the Duchess of Angoulême being come to take her place in the coach, by an almost inconceivable act of weakness, or perhaps of maternal indulgence, taking Mademoiselle d’Heilly by the arm, she made her sit opposite her son.

“Was it chance, was it a secret calculation, which caused this arrangement? It would be difficult to say.

“One thing is certain, Francis was transported with joy, and the whole journey was like a fairy dream, which only ended in a sort of way at Paris. But there even the awakening was splendid; and a week after the reinstallation of the king on the greatest throne of the world, both court and town talked of nothing but His Majesty’s infatuation for the fortunate Mademoiselle d’Heilly.”

Here Herminie stretched out her hand to her uncle as though to thank him for his trouble.

He pressed the hand with paternal fervour and continued.

CHAPTER LVII

Continuation of the reading of the Baron de Kermouan's manuscript.

“THE favourite, my dear child, whose education and whose wit gave her the reputation of the wisest of the beautiful, and the most beautiful of the wise, thoroughly understood the rules of the art of pleasing. Each of her advances in the royal favour was marked by a triumph, and those who had not favoured this new intrigue began to repent when they saw the despotic influence with which the idol surrounded herself from day to day. They saw that it was of no use fighting against fortune, and, understanding the danger of a struggle in which they were certain to get the worst of it, they made up their minds to share her power rather than oppose it; hence it resulted that a secret compact was made between the favourite and the ministers containing a silent understanding, which was stipulated clearly enough, to mutually protect and sustain each other.

“At the moment where we re-commence the course of our narrative, a project of considerable importance occupied the king's advisers at the château. Francis I. was not satisfied with the

equivocal nature of Mademoiselle d'Heilly's position at court ; he desired at least to avoid a sort of public reprobation which might at any time fall on his well-beloved, for he felt that she ought to have, in appearance at least, a rank more worthy of him and of her. He was plunged in deep reflections on this subject, when an usher announced that the Chancellor Duprat solicited the honour of being at once admitted to His Majesty's presence.

“ ‘ Let him come in,’ said Francis, who was a little annoyed.

“ The Chancellor entered, and from his master's frown he very quickly understood that, at that moment, any serious affair he might commence upon would be very badly received. Fortunately for him he had prepared for such a reception . . . the first words which he uttered caused the wrinkles to disappear from the king's brow.

“ ‘ I have been thinking, sire, about what you have said upon the subject of Mademoiselle d'Heilly.’

“ ‘ Ah ! very good.’

“ ‘ I think I have found what we want.’

“ ‘ My dear Duprat,’ cried the king, ‘ you are a prince of a man . . . believe that a brilliant reward . . . ’

“ ‘ My only desire is to prove my devotion to your Majesty,’ said Duprat, modestly. ‘ I am only too happy if what I have arranged should obtain your Majesty's approbation.’

“ ‘Speak, Duprat, speak, my friend.’

“ ‘Your Majesty is annoyed at certain indiscreet remarks which have been made upon the great good fortune of Mademoiselle Anne d’Heilly.’

“ ‘The king let a sigh escape him.

“ ‘Your Majesty wishes that this situation, which is, in sooth, a rather doubtful one, should be consecrated by an honourable title, a marriage . . .’

“ ‘The very thing,’ cried the king, ‘the very thing.’

“ ‘I think,’ continued Duprat, ‘that we have found what we are looking for. Does your Majesty remember a certain Jean de Brosse, a poor nobleman who is ruined? . . .’

“ ‘And who troubles with his claims all the courts in the kingdom? He is continually pretending to have lost all his patrimony? . . .’

“ ‘In the cruel wars which disfigured the reign of your predecessor, yes, sire. Having made up my mind to finish with this man, for, after all, he is said to be brave and devoted, I caused him to come to Paris, and last night he was at the queen-mother’s reception. Perhaps, sire, your Majesty noticed him?’

“ ‘I! Are you mad, Duprat? . . . And for what possible reason, I ask you, should I notice a Breton or Norman nobleman, whoever he might be, who had dusty boots and the appearance of a country squire? Besides, she was there, she, my dear d’Heilly,

my beautiful Anne ! . . . And, as you know well, when she is present my eyes see none but her.'

" 'That is so, sire . . . but he, also, had his eyes continually turned towards her. . . .'

" 'What do you say?' burst out the king in a rage. 'The fellow dared ! . . .'

" 'Do not trouble yourself, sire ; the Chevalier Jean de Brosse is a man of incredible simplicity—a virtue worthy of primitive times. That which everybody knows, he is ignorant of . . . and it is exactly this ignorance of his . . .'

" 'That you wish to profit by? . . . Continue, Duprat ; I begin to understand you.'

" 'There is nothing more to add, sire, and the few words which you have uttered prove to me that my plan has well-nigh obtained your approbation. The Chevalier is the man for us. We shall persuade him, we will dazzle him . . .'

" 'It is enough,' interrupted the king once more, who, more jealous of his dignity than might be supposed, wished at least to appear ignorant of a plan of which he was in reality the instigator and accomplice ; 'it is enough. You say, Duprat, that the Chevalier de Brosse is a nobleman whose merits deserve our attention. Make a proposal in his favour and we will consider it.'

" The Chancellor Duprat was too clever not to understand the real meaning, in the mouth of the king, of this formal phrase, which served to disguise

a shameless piece of perfidy. As a man of tact, he thought that it would be imprudent to explain further, and he retired in order to take steps to accomplish the enterprise thus wisely conceived.

“ The following morning the Chevalier Jean de Brosse was received in private audience by the Chancellor Duprat. M. de Montmorency, the Lord High Constable, leant against the side of the mantel-piece as a man who, without being directly called there by necessity, is yet taking part officially in a conversation of the highest importance.

“ ‘ Upon my soul and upon my honour ! ’ cried the Chevalier, after having heard the proposals of Duprat, ‘ you can say, my lord, to King Francis I. that I am his, heart, body, and sword, and that all my blood would not suffice to repay the favours with which he has overwhelmed me to-day.’

“ ‘ They are no favours, Messire de Brosse ; they are simply just rewards, due, in the first place, to your merits, also to the memory of your father, who, in his time, loyally served France and the king. His Majesty pays a debt and indemnifies you, that is all.’

“ ‘ That is all,’ repeated, like an echo, the voice of M. de Montmorency.

“ ‘ I beg pardon,’ said the poor nobleman, whose emotion caused him to totter, ‘ I beg pardon . . . my lord . . . but perhaps this is but a dream . . . ’

“ ‘ No, no, s’death ! You are wide awake,’ said the Constable.

“ ‘Then,’ replied the Chevalier, ‘it is really true that this marriage of which you were speaking a moment or two ago . . .’

“ ‘Is desired by His Majesty? . . . There isn’t a doubt of it.’

“ ‘And the person indicated . . .’

“ ‘What! Do you want to know once more?’

“ ‘That lady,’ replied De Brosse, ‘that charming lady . . . is . . .’

“ ‘Mademoiselle d’Heilly! . . . Assuredly . . . she whom you looked upon the other evening at the royal reception with such enthusiastic admiration. . . .’

“ ‘Zounds! the king is good to me! . . .’ murmured Messire de Brosse, who had become lost in thought.

“ ‘The king wishes you well,’ said the Chancellor Duprat, ‘that is all.’

“ ‘That is all,’ repeated once more the same echo, that is to say, the voice of the Constable.

“The Chevalier lost his head in his joy and delight. Duprat understood that he must not give time to allow the love-fever to abate; if he wished to profit by its effects, he must strike while the iron was hot. That very evening there was a reception in the king’s apartments, where the tables were set out for cards, and things were so managed that the Sire Jean de Brosse was placed opposite Mademoiselle d’Heilly. The heart of the Chevalier could not resist such terrible shocks. He left the palace madly in love. . . . The following

day, upon the advice of Duprat, he made a proposition to Mademoiselle d'Heilly, which was at once accepted. The king, on the pretext that he would have to sign the contract, insisted on being present at the interview, and it was to this circumstance that the Sire de Brosse attributed the very visible embarrassment which, when he addressed his humble petition to her who was destined for him, had spread over her countenance. This appearance had continued awhile like a dark cloud on the horizon of his happiness . . . but soon, thinking only of the glorious distinction with which the king honoured him, he put aside all ideas which might have been of a nature to shake his resolution, and rushed, proud and happy, into that new career which spread so promisingly before him.

“Eight days after these events, the marriage was celebrated under the auspices of the king and of the most distinguished nobility of France.

“Only, in place of his simple and ancient title of Chevalier, Messire de Brosse inscribed in the register of the church his new dignity and his new name: *Governor of Brittany and Duc d'Etampes*. . . .

“The governorship and the dukedom were the wedding present of King Francis I.

“The bridegroom was all smiles . . . the bride alone seemed restless, and was horribly pale. . . .

“But round them compliments and felicitations were showered like grains of incense and golden spangles.

"After the nuptial benediction they returned to the court.

"The king enjoyed, without doubt, the pleasure of having made two people happy, for he paid innumerable attentions to the married pair. He would not let them out of his sight . . . he begged them to give up the rest of the day to him, and expressed his wish to see them seated side by side at the evening banquet.

"The wish was an order. The Duke and Duchess d'Etampes submitted with a good grace. . . .

"A little before midnight a coach bore the wedded pair towards their hotel. For the first time they were together without witnesses. The duke wished to speak, but the anxious look which had come back to the face of the duchess froze the words upon his lips. At last the drive, which was a very short one, came to an end. The duke got out first, and, attended by several footmen, offered his arm to his wife, who sprung lightly to the ground and entered the house.

"The Duc d'Etampes was about to follow, when the crowd of footmen surrounded him, and said that a great lord wished to speak with him. He turned and saw the Chancellor Duprat.

" 'Excellency,' he said, 'what does this mean?'

" 'Re-enter your carriage,' answered Duprat.

'We can speak more conveniently there.'

"The duke stared at Duprat in astonishment.

" 'Listen,' said the latter in a low voice; 'a great

peril menaces the kingdom. . . . Couriers just arrived announce that Brittany is in revolt. The presence there of the new governor is indispensable. . . . A single hour, a single minute of delay may lose all. . . . In return for what His Majesty has done for you, will you refuse to render him a service on which perhaps depends the safety of his crown? . . .'

"'But, your Excellency, the duchess . . . my wife! . . .'

"'I wish to spare you both a painful farewell. I charge myself with explaining to her the necessity of your prompt departure. . . . Do not forget that the king is counting upon you.'

"'Monseigneur, I obey,' said the duke, as he bowed his head.

* * * *

"Some minutes afterwards the Chancellor descended from the coach, and the horses, urged at a furious pace, carried towards Brittany Messire Jean de Brosse, who, without comprehending what had happened to him, involuntarily thought of his past troubles, of his rapid elevation, and of the unexpected *dénouement* of the whole affair.

"If a curious passer-by had fixed his eyes upon the mansion before which the coach had but lately stood, he would have seen that a curtain was raised, and that behind the casement a white shadow was disclosed, which stood staring in silence on the dusty road.

"It was the Duchesse d'Etampes, who, distressed yet silent, cold though her eye was wet with a tear of pity, gazed on the departure of the man whom, by an odious comedy in which she had been compelled to be an accomplice, she had just accepted as her lord and master."

"Your story is deeply interesting," said I to the Baron de Kermouan.

"Oh! wait, wait," said he, "it is the end that is interesting."

Then, after coughing slightly, he recommenced:

"About six months after these events a man of pallid countenance, with fiery eyes, was shut up in a secret apartment of an old castle in Brittany; he rested his head upon his two hands, and seemed a prey to the most melancholy preoccupation.

"Before him stood an old man, a man who seemed prematurely aged and grey before his time, and yet there were about him traces of nobility of bearing and vigour. Assuredly this man had suffered much, and the feeble body had been caused by a wounded soul.

"The first of these two men was Messire de Brosse, whom royal favour had made Governor of Brittany and Duc d'Etampes.

"The second was named Jean de Montmorency-Laval, Comte de Châteaubriand.

"A long silence seemed to have interrupted a conversation already commenced. Jean de Brosse continued in the following words:

“‘I have lived a long while far away from the court, monsieur le comte, so that it is not very astonishing that I know nothing of the defilements that have disgraced the present reign. . . . You also say you have cause of complaint.’

“‘Listen,’ said the Comte de Châteaubriand in melancholy tones. ‘Till now I have left a good deal to your imagination . . . from this moment I shall conceal nothing.’

“The Duc d’Etampes turned towards the old man with a sort of despairing interest.

“The count spoke as follows:

“‘It was about the year 1508. I was rich and I possessed a great name. Here, under the pale sun of Brittany, there grew a pure and tender flower, whose fragrance, whose beauty, I, fool that I was, took a pleasure in inhaling and admiring. . . . Ah! Françoise de Foix was a beautiful girl! . . .’

“‘Françoise de Foix!’ murmured the Duc d’Etampes. ‘That name seems to recall something to my mind.’

“‘Yes . . . you remember, do you not? The fame of her beauty was known throughout the countryside, and each one declared, on hearing of the marriage of Françoise, that he was a happy man who, in one and the same moment, could give her the title of bride and a name equal to her own.’

“‘And yet you were not happy?’ said the Duc d’Etampes in a feeble voice.

“ ‘I was happy for seven years,’ said the count with solemnity. . . . ‘For seven years, during which, to tell the truth, I only allowed the eyes of Françoise to gaze on the beautiful shadows of the forest and the wonders of the skies. But one day, one accursed day, a lawsuit took me to Paris. My name, my rank imposed upon me the necessity of presenting myself at court . . . the king Francis was astonished at my leaving my wife at home, and that I did not take advantage of my journey to let her appear upon a stage which was worthy of her. . . . For some time I resisted . . . but what can one do when the king commands. . . . I yielded. . . . Françoise de Foix joined me at the court!’

“ ‘Oh, imprudent man! imprudent man!’ murmured the sad voice of Jean de Brosse.

“ ‘Yes, imprudent indeed, you have said the word . . . for there is, in the royal paradise, a kind of burning atmosphere, in which the most sacred obligations melt away like snow; there is no woman, however virtuous, who quits it without a blush of shame upon her cheek and remorse in her heart . . . for Françoise de Foix, Countess de Châteaubriand, when she crossed the threshold of the palace for the first time, wore a smile upon her lips and carried her head as high as her own proud heart; one day she left it restless, red with shame—and dishonoured!’

“ ‘And then?’ cried the duke excitedly.

“ ‘Then, then,’ answered the old count, whose

tones grew more solemn and more sad, 'I turned over in my mind unheard of projects of vengeance. . . . At one moment I thought of going straight to the villain who had ravished my treasure from me, of striking him over the face with the flat of my sword, and then flinging aside the weapon as too noble to use upon a coward such as he, to pitilessly strike him with a dagger-thrust. Heaven is my witness. . . . If I did not carry out this fearful thought, it was from no fear of punishment, nor was it the prestige of royalty that stayed my hand. . . . I feared naught but ridicule, and I saw my sword all ready as it was for the insult, and my dagger all ready as it was for vengeance, fall in turns from my hands. I could not bear to be laughed at . . . I could not bear that, in seeing me pass through their midst, all the rigid fops of the Louvre should take to whispering amongst themselves and saying, "Look at that man! . . . He dares to live, dishonoured as he is. . . . That is the husband of the mistress of the king!"'

"'Horror! horror!' said the hoarse voice of Jean de Brosse.

"'What did I care at that moment for the accursed lawsuit, which had brought me to court. I left Paris like a criminal, who, being pursued by a thousand dangers, dares not turn his head. It was, in appearance, an inglorious flight . . . in reality, it was the heroism of resignation. The two brothers of Françoise, Lautrec and Lescun, had been less scrupulous than

I . . . they had accepted titles, employments, and honours from the hand that had besmirched their faces . . . as for me, I sought but to hide myself. . . . At length, the king left for Italy. . . . His departure was the sign of the countess's approaching fall. The wantons of kings excite so many jealousies, so many hatreds! Françoise de Foix, insulted and outraged, thought of the husband she had so unworthily betrayed, and, turning to him in her distress, she asked for an asylum and pleaded for pardon . . .'

" 'And have you pardoned her, count?'

" 'Wait . . . the laws of Christianity ordained that I should not close my door to her who had shared my couch and borne my name . . . I received her on her return to Brittany.'

" 'As the father in the Bible,' burst in Jean de Brosse, 'received the prodigal son, with open arms . . .'

" 'Not so,' said the Count de Châteaubriand, 'but as a judge receives a prisoner who comes to implore supreme justice. Thus the gates of the castle opened to let the countess pass, duke. But once within, the lady of the castle became a prisoner, for when the gates closed on her, the castle became a prison.'

" 'And then! count, and then!'

" 'And then, it was an hourly, a continuous torture . . . she had not told me her sufferings, she was too proud; and my vengeance was not less generous; I treated the countess as a woman whose

crime exceeded the limit of vulgar guilt. She pretended to pray to God . . . hypocrisy ! She said that she repented . . . a lie ! . . . She asked me for mercy . . . an infamous snare ! . . . She would have been the first to laugh, had I allowed myself to be caught in it . . . I, myself, caused her to enter a room hung with black ; through a grating one could just see the sky, and there, for two years, she was able to reflect at ease upon the wrong which she had done to my white hairs !'

" 'And at the end of those 'two years?' ' cried the Duc d'Etampes, who had listened eagerly to the count.

" 'At the end of those two years the king returned to France. How she learnt it I do not know ; but one thing is sure, certain words which were heard to fall from her lips prove that either a royal message or a presentiment told her as much . . . it was her death-warrant . . .'

" 'What are you saying, count ?' cried the duke, springing to his feet ; the man was pale and his eyes sparkled.

" 'I said that the king was in France, and that I did not wish that the well-beloved should go and join him. Without doubt there were iron bars in the prison ; but iron bars may be filed, a jailor may be corrupted, then farewell punishment ! Besides, the heart of woman turns continually to her old love. . . . One night I came to her in her prison and I told her

that she must die. She gave one cry, one terrible cry, a hideous, infernal sound which even now re-echoes in my ears. Then almost immediately she seemed resigned, or rather conquered; she murmured, "Kill me!"

"'But your courage failed you,' Jean de Brosse panted.

"'I had taken my precautions against myself,' cried the count. 'I had brought with me men who knew no pity. At a sign from me they seized the Countess of Châteaubriand, they silently bandaged her eyes, and like skilful surgeons, they opened her veins, asking me if I was satisfied.'

"'Oh! it is horrible,' murmured Messire Jean de Brosse, burying his face in his hands.

"'An instant after, the victim was dead.'

"The old man was calm. The Duc d'Etampes, on the contrary, was livid, trembling in every limb; he was a prey to a frightful agitation.

"'Why have you told me this terrible history?' he blurted out at length, but in so low a tone as hardly to be heard.

"'To pass the time . . .' coldly answered the old man with the soul of bronze.

"Then, rising from his chair, he added, purposely accentuating the new title of Messire Jean de Brosse:

"'Monsieur le Duc d'Etampes, you know what remains for you to do. Farewell!'

"There was a long silence. When the duke

raised his head, he was alone. The Count de Châteaubriand had disappeared.

“The Duchesse d’Etampes at this time was not merely the king’s mistress ; she was also Queen of France. Everything was done by her or for her ; and the great lords who were at the helm of government were content to hold a sort of delegated authority from her, doing nothing until she had first been consulted. She had even succeeded in entangling the Queen of Navarre, the king’s sister, in the bonds of a close friendship, and this lady continually made herself remarkable by the sympathy she showed for her brother’s mistresses.

“It was not the same with the Dauphin, who held her but in slight affection, and with Diane de Poitiers, the mistress of the latter, who cordially detested her. . . . Every sun has at least one shadow ; already the Duchesse d’Etampes was compelled to fight for her position ; when a woman occupies a place desired by many rivals, she has to hold it by force of stratagem, of talents, and of beauty !

“Fifteen years had passed during which the car of the favourite had pursued its brilliant career, in the midst of the applause of a crowd of kneeling courtiers, and if ever the remembrance of the man who had been given to her as a husband had crossed her mind, his presence had never saddened her continuous triumphs. . . . The duchess forgot that one evening when she was walking, alone and un-

attended in one of the gloomy avenues of the park at Fontainebleau, a man, wrapped in a cloak and masked, had followed her some time at a distance, that at length he had rushed upon her, a naked sword in his hand. She tried to forget that as he reached her the mask had fallen, and that she fancied that she recognised Messire Jean de Brosse.

“Little by little the memory of the thing was blotted out ; at length the last trace of it disappeared entirely from her mind.

“On the day which corresponds with the present portion of our narrative the court was plunged in the deepest affliction. A courier, who had ridden furiously from Perpignan, brought the news that the siege of that city, which had been commenced by the Dauphin (afterwards Henry II.), had been raised, and that the enemy's troops triumphed. At this news, which was brought by the Comte de Bossut, Diane de Poitiers, the Dauphin's mistress, had turned pale, for it seemed that the defeat of her lover reflected upon her, and a sign of intelligence was exchanged between the Comte de Bossut and the Duchesse d'Etampes.

“What secret intelligence could exist between the bearer of this painful news and the king's mistress ? . . . We shall know later on.

“The king had aged a little, and his heart, less susceptible of emotion than before, no longer felt so acutely the humiliation of a defeat.

“ ‘God will declare himself on our side some other time,’ said he, with an indifference which was strange indeed in a French monarch.

“ Then, with a passionate glance at the Duchesse d’Etampes, he had added :

“ ‘Ladies, and you too, gentlemen, I wish to be alone . . . leave me.’

“ The order was immediately obeyed. The Duchesse d’Etampes alone remained, for she knew that such an order did not concern her.

“ ‘My dear Anne,’ said the king, ‘thanks for having understood my thoughts. I wish to be alone with you.’

“ ‘Sire, I am honoured. . . .’

“ ‘I know that you are devoted to me, beautiful mistress, and your conduct is all the more meritorious because I have very often shown myself unworthy.’

“ The duchess interrupted her royal lover by a gesture ; he was in the habit in moments of amorous confidence of frankly accusing himself of numerous infidelities.

“ ‘Yes, yes!’ insisted Francis I.; ‘I wish to speak of your wrongs because I am determined to make up for them . . .’

“ ‘What do you mean by that, sire?’

“ ‘I intend in future, my dear Anne, to give you that position in my heart which you, for so long, have entirely occupied. . . . Above all things, I wish that in my court no power shall dare to rival yours,

that there shall be no woman who dares to offend you, that no other star shall dare shine in your firmament.'

"The beautiful eyes of the duchess sparkled with joy.

"'In a few days hence, in order not to hurry matters, my dear Anne, I will gratify the Dauphin with a good government in one of the finest provinces of France, and . . . quite naturally . . .'

"'Quite naturally? . . .' repeated the duchess with hesitation . . .

"'Diane de Poitiers will follow him.'

"'Sire! sire!' cried the duchess, flinging herself at the king's feet. 'How can I thank you?'

"'By always loving me,' said Francis.

"The king rose and left the apartment, and the duchess, no longer dreading to show her joy before witnesses, cried:

"'At last to-day my triumph is complete.'

"Night came, and her heart was still filled with pride. Already she had sent away her women, and she was about to get into bed, when a gentle tapping was heard at the door.

"'Who could dare . . . at such an hour? . . .' she murmured with a shudder.

"But almost immediately she had recovered from her alarm:

"'Ah! It is the king!' she cried.

"And smiling at the thought, for, for some time

the visits of Francis I. had been somewhat infrequent, she went to the door and drew the bolt.

“ She started back, uttering a loud scream.

“ The man who appeared in the doorway was Jean de Brosse, Duc d'Etampes ; so that it was not a mistress meeting her fond lover, but a guilty woman in the presence of an outraged husband.”

The young Herminie could not repress at this point a significant shudder.

The old man, whose features had gradually grown animated as he continued his narration, stopped an instant to take breath, and then went on.

CHAPTER LVIII

Continuation and end of the reading of Baron de Kermouan's manuscript — Lively emotion of Mademoiselle Herminie — She insists on returning to Brittany — The baron is triumphant — I plead for His Majesty — M. de Kermouan's protestations of devotion — I return to Versailles with my tail between my legs — Louis XIV. is discontented — Mademoiselle Herminie leaves the same evening, with her uncle, for Nantes.

“THE Duchesse d’Etampes tried to remember that she was the woman who held the loftiest position at the court; the remembrance of that fact caused her to feel a sudden pride, enabled her to hold an arrogant attitude, and to sustain the shock she felt she was menaced with without flinching.

“But the duke looked steadily into her eyes, and that look quenched her bold spirit, and made her bow her head against her will.

“‘What would you with me, sir?’ she said in a low tone.

“‘Ah, ha! You deign to recognise me, madame! I thank you for it,’ answered Messire Jean de Brosse ironically. ‘On my soul, I did not hope to be so easily admitted into the sanctuary whence is daily diffused the fructifying dew of the king’s favours and

good deeds. . . . Ah ! perhaps you were expecting someone !'

" 'Sir . . . '

" 'Do not be alarmed . . . I do not come here to play the *rôle* of the husband who is angry and who makes a noise. . . . Besides, Time, the great consoler, the great physician, has passed over the wounds of my soul, and has sown there, if not the seeds of forgetfulness, at all events those of profound and deliberate scorn. . . . '

"The duchess drew herself up and wished to speak.

" 'I see how it is,' recommenced Jean de Brosse with a mocking smile ; 'your delicate ears are not accustomed to such rough sounds ; they injure them, perhaps. . . . It doesn't matter, there must be a shadow even in your glory. The Roman to whom a triumph was decreed had behind his car, in days gone by, a paid insulter, who flung at him jeers and insults. I am come to be your insulter, my lady duchess, and, in order to distract your mind from the continuous concert of cheering which ever surrounds you as you pass, I am come to tell you that, perhaps, which you have never heard in your life—the truth.'

"The duchess groaned. . . . The duke continued :

" 'You are fed upon flattery, you are praised ; it is said you reign over France. . . . I—I tell you, madame, the thing which is. You are a lost woman, a guilty wife, and the dishonour with which you have

covered yourself is reflected upon that France whose riches you have pillaged and whose blood you sell. . . .’

“ At this reproach Madame d’Etampes became very pale, and answered with sombre vivacity:

“ ‘ What does this reproach mean ? ’

“ ‘ It signifies, madame la duchesse, that the rivalry which exists between you and Madame Diane de Poitiers, that other harlot marked with the fleurs-de-lys, will ruin the country and cause terrible disaster to the crown ; it signifies that to annoy Madame Diane, whom you cannot forgive for continually repeating that she was born on the day of your marriage, you have done, and you will do, every possible evil to her lover, our lord the Dauphin of France; it signifies that, urged on by this perfidious spirit of jealousy, you have handed over secrets of State to the allies, Henry VIII. and Charles V., on the expressed condition that the two monarchs shall raise to the throne the Duke of Orleans, to the injury of the Dauphin, his brother. . . .’

“ ‘ It is not so ! ’ cried the duchess, who trembled at recognising that her schemes were seen through by a man whose intelligence she had hardly believed in until now.

“ ‘ You say that it is not so ! Who, then, betrayed to the enemy the strength of the force of the Dauphin, which was about to seize on Perpignan, and which, betrayed by some unknown influence, found itself obliged to raise the siege of the town ? ’

“ ‘ The man is mad ! ’ said the duchess, shrugging

her shoulders, and screwing up her courage as she said the words, she stretched out her hand towards the bell as if to call for help.

“ Jean de Brosse grasped her arm and said :

“ ‘ Wait ; France has been speaking to you through my voice. Now it is the husband’s turn. There are three moments in my life, madame, which are points of contact between my remembrance and yours. The first is expressed by the word love . . . I loved you like a madman ! The second is comprised entirely of the word hate, for, if your memory is as good as your sight, you will remember the armed man who pursued you in the park of Fontainebleau. . . . I wished to kill you ! . . . As for the third, seek in your thoughts, madame, for the most humiliating and at the same time the calmest sentiment a man can feel . . . ’

“ ‘ Sir, you forget ! . . . ’

“ ‘ Ah ! I see that you have deigned to understand me . . . it is contempt.’

“ Jean de Brosse still grasped the arm of the Duchesse d’Etampes. At that moment he must have squeezed it hard, for she groaned out :

“ ‘ You hurt me, sir ! Let go my arm ! . . . ’

“ ‘ Not before I have had the pleasure of seeing on her knees at my feet the woman who reigns over France . . . and over the king.’

“ The duchess, tormented by the clutch of iron, which crushed her wrist, found herself forced to her knees.

“She gave a groan of pain, and then she fainted.

“When she came to herself, and could rise, Jean de Brosse had disappeared.

“That fatal night, marked by the unexpected appearance of the man she had so deeply wronged, was the commencement of misfortunes for the Duchesse d’Etampes.

“The king, Francis I., enfeebled by his successes, worn out by illnesses, was about to die, and, notwithstanding all the intrigues of his beloved duchess, who, after twenty years of power, was still his best-loved mistress, the Dauphin was drawing nearer to the throne and about to ascend it under the name of **Henri II.**

“At last, one dark day in 1547, men learnt that after a terrible struggle, Francis I. had succumbed.

“‘The king is dead, long live the king!’ cried everyone aloud.

“‘The Duchesse d’Etampes is dead, long live Diane de Poitiers,’ they thought in silence.

“And yet there was still a shadow of a struggle between the rising star and the fallen one. Diane did not obtain all at once the immense power of which her rival had been so proud for many years. It was, it is true, but a struggle for a few days; but on both sides there was fury and determination. After all, there could be no doubt of the result of such a struggle. Abandoned by even those who had profited in the days of her power, betrayed by heart-

less courtiers who had called themselves her friends, the Duchesse d'Etampes found herself at the commencement of the new reign just as humiliated as she had been proud, just as loaded with contempt as she had been once wearied with praise, adulation, and even adoration.

"A single look of scorn which had been levelled at her by Diane de Poitiers at the solemn funeral ceremonies of Francis I. revealed to her all the tortures that were reserved for her wounded vanity, should she dare to reappear at court. She decided upon a voluntary exile.

"She was satisfied that her determination would justify her self-love, and she fancied that she should justly deprive her rival of the easy triumph she would have enjoyed had she been imprudent enough to carry her useless resistance too far.

"Diane, who had just received the title of Duchesse de Valentinois, would not deprive herself of the joy of crushing Madame d'Etampes with the whole weight of her generosity. She commissioned M. de Montmorency to bear to her a magnificent present, a written permission to retire whithersoever she might please.

"This insolent form of charity wounded the duchess to the heart. She refused everything, and placed her future in the hands of God. Then commenced for Madame d'Etampes a life of trials and persecutions, which, though they are hardly recorded

in history, were none the less so many stabs which caused her heart to bleed cruelly.

“ Her riches were, to tell the truth, the king’s. The king being dead, she found herself almost poor. Her numerous debts absorbed the revenues of her various estates, which she owed to the royal bounty ; and one day she awoke, in the modest lodging which she had chosen, her head full of frightful dreams, and looking with frightened eyes upon a menacing future of despair and misery.

“ All at once a consoling idea illumined her soul, and she dropped into a long reverie. After having compared the glories of her past with her present obscurity, after letting her thoughts go back to those dazzling and splendid days when she feared nothing, and when everyone trembled at her very look, then she remembered that there was one man in the world who would protect her, if not from affection, at least from a sentiment of duty. She remembered that, after all, she was still beautiful, and that it would be easy for her to reanimate in his bosom the flicker of a forgotten love.

“ She left Paris and journeyed towards Brittany. . .

“ At the bottom of one of those romantic and savage sites which abound in the old Armorica arises an ancient château with thick walls, a heavy draw-bridge, and crenellated towers. One reached it by a sort of ravine cut between two mountains, which seemed from afar like two giants about to wrestle.

It seemed impossible to fancy anything more imposing or more majestic.

"One warm evening in autumn the Breton peasants perceived, on reaching their cottages, a woman, clothed in black, who slowly scaled the steep ascents of the road, and walked faster when she came to a slope which assisted her progress.

"The woman seemed to follow a road to which she had been previously directed.

"When she came in sight of the old manor, she stopped and called to her a shepherd-boy who was taking home his flock :

" 'My friend,' she said to him, 'can you not tell me if the château one sees from here is not that of the Duc d'Etampes ? '

"The shepherd stared at the beautiful lady and shook his head.

" 'I didn't quite hear,' he said.

"The duchess repeated her question word for word.

" 'Pardon me, madame,' he answered this time, 'I do not know that name.'

"Madame d'Etampes was not astonished at his answer. The little shepherd was but a child, and his insignificant face and his dull and fixed eyes made him resemble one of those poor idiots of the Alps who know neither how to weep nor how to smile, and who live miserably outside the pale of creation.

" 'He didn't understand me,' thought the duchess.

“Then she set forward again.

“Further on she came upon an old man seated upon a stone bench in front of his cottage. She asked him the same question.

“‘I have a confused remembrance, madame,’ answered the old peasant, ‘of the name which you have just uttered . . . but the château of which you speak belongs to an excellent man whose good deeds are seen everywhere on the countryside . . .’

“‘And his name?’ interrupted the duchess, impatiently.

“‘And who is called Messire Jean de Brosse,’ said the old man, finishing his sentence.

“A bitter and lively emotion stirred the heart of Madame d’Etampes.

“She recognised that the name which she had borne, the name which she had been so proud of, the name which had been so long the talisman to which were attached all the favours and the glories of the court, that name in the province in which she had come to seek shelter was unknown, despised, dishonoured.

“‘Oh God! Oh God!’ she murmured, ‘what further trials are reserved for me?’

“She waved her hand to the old man and walked on towards the château, whose towers threw a cold sad shadow on the path.

“When she reached the door a dull inquietude ran through her soul, and all her blood seemed to flow back towards her heart.

“ ‘Courage!’ she thought, ‘courage! Is he not my husband? It is his duty to receive me.’

“She rang the bell. A lackey opened the door.

“This time she did not ask for the Duc d’Etampes, but for Messire Jean de Brosse.

“ ‘My master,’ said the man, ‘has ordered me to admit no one; but if you will tell me who you are, I will let him know, and perhaps . . . ’

“ ‘There is no need for me to tell you who I am; you can say that a lady desires to speak with him, and I am sure that he will come.’

“ ‘If you will wait, madame, I will try.’

“The man departed. The duchess remained at the door of the château as though she had been a beggar waiting for alms.

“A little while after, the sound of footsteps was heard in the paved courtyard, and a voice said :

“ ‘How, then, do you not know the woman?’

“ ‘No, messire! I have never seen her.’

“ ‘A woman . . . at my house! At this hour!’

“Here the valet left his master, having doubtlessly been ordered to do so, and Jean de Brosse, now alone, drew back the heavy bolt of the door.

“It was still daylight. He immediately recognised the duchess. The man’s eyes grew injected with blood.

“ ‘What do you here?’ he asked, in a tone in which there was more anger than pity.

“ ‘I have come to find a home . . . and tran-

quillity,' answered Madame d'Etampes, less humbly, perhaps, than might have been supposed, because her husband's disdainful tone had wounded her in a sentiment which was not yet altogether extinguished in her—her pride.

"Jean de Brosse was for a moment lost in thought, and his pallor bore witness to the combat which was taking place within his soul. At length he answered coldly :

" 'There is a place which is always open to the repentant sinner, the nunnery . . . a being superior to us all is God ; he never refuses hospitality. After this advice, go where it may seem good to you, madame ; the rest which you seek you may not find here.'

"Then the door, resounding, heavy, inexorably was closed.

"The despairing duchess stood motionless as though rooted to the ground.

"The valet met his master in the courtyard and said to him :

" 'Have you seen the woman, messire ?'

"There was a silence. But soon the voice of Jean de Brosse was heard as he turned away :

" 'The woman, yes, I saw her, but I recognise her no more than you do ! . . .'

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"The duchess left the manor house, whence she seemed to hear the sound of horrible curses and

menacing echoes. It was a frightful dream. She descended the stony paths without noticing that blood was running from her delicate feet ; they were little-used to such a weary way.

"She walked on through the night, she fled from that inhospitable region, she fled from herself. . . .

"From that day the life of the Duchesse d'Etampes was but a series of misfortunes and humiliations. It is said that she passed the last part of the life which had become so obscure after being so brilliant in succouring, with the little that remained to her, the partisans of Protestantism, a religion which she had secretly embraced.

"As for her death, no man knows its circumstances nor its date. An uncrowned queen, a forgotten favourite, she had not that which even the most unhappy on this earth possesses, a tomb on which is written a name, so that, before that tomb and before that name, some faithful Christian or some unknown friend may kneel perchance and breathe a prayer.

"To die thus, is it not annihilation indeed? . . ."

At this question, Mademoiselle Herminie de Kermouan rose pale and upright in front of the table. She stretched out her hand as though to answer, but fell back into her seat half-fainting as she murmured :

"Brittany! Yes! . . . Brittany! . . . I want to start . . . take me away."

"You hear her, duke," said the baron, making me

a low bow. "Mademoiselle Herminie de Kermouan, my dearly-loved niece, wishes to go back to Brittany. In half-an-hour she will have left Versailles. Be good enough, I entreat you, to make our humble excuses to His Majesty. . . ."

"I repeat to you, monsieur le baron," said I with some bitterness, "that all this seems to be somewhat insulting and injurious to the illustrious personage whose envoy and representative I am."

"No, monsieur le duc," said the Baron de Kermouan, with a noble gesture of pride, "there is no insult meant to anybody here. I have a treasure, and I guard it; the honour of my name is a trust, transmitted to me by my ancestors; I hold it to the best of my ability. I do not want my niece to have to reproach herself with a shameful action, so be it! . . . but that does not prevent my being quite ready to shed my blood for the king's service."

We exchanged a few more words, and I returned to the palace without bringing with me that delicious marvel of beauty who should have been the queen of the ball that night. I was plied with questions which I had to answer with shadowy reasons, each more evasive than the other, and which, as may be guessed, were far from satisfying Louis XIV.

That very evening, Mademoiselle Herminie de Kermouan really left for Nantes, where she contracted a marriage about six months later with the sole heir of one of the most ancient families of Berri.

CHAPTER LIX

An evening entertainment at President Aubry's—D'Orgeval, the Marquis d'Alluye, and Pommereuil—Tragic deaths—Extraordinary events—Sad recitals—Each one tells a terrible tale—My turn comes—The poet Sarrazin—M. and Madame Catelan—An original dinner—Drunkenness of Sarrazin—Singular attitude of Madame Catelan—I am much puzzled—I wish to leave—But am detained—Catelan makes me take a solemn oath—We return to table—An amorous correspondence—Terrible effect of its being read aloud—A merciless husband—Two victims—Public rumours and the truth—The very sweet moral of a very dull story—Madame de Bacqueville—A coquette's fascinations—I grow diffident—My resistance—A dizain of the poet Maynard.

ONE day I was at President Aubry's with D'Orgeval, the Marquis d'Alluye, and Pommereuil; the conversation turned on to dreadful deaths and happenings which are outside the ordinary rules of life. Each of us appealed to his memory and told his tale. One was present at the sad end of poor Cyrano de Bergerac; another had seen the famous duel between Guise and Coligny; a third told of the murderous scenes of which he had been an eyewitness during the disturbances in Paris at the time of the Fronde; another wound up by declaring he had seen, in person, Monaldeschi, Christine of Sweden's

master of the horse, yield his soul and bleed to death in the gallery of Fontainebleau.

There was a clapping of hands at each of these dark and dismal reminiscences.

The more terrible the story, the greater was the applause.

"Everybody has told his bogey-story," remarked the President's wife; "the only one who has been silent is our friend the Duc de Roquelaure. But that does not surprise me in the least. For his gaiety assorts ill with dismal talk."

"Why so, I pray," I replied.

"Because we are talking on subjects which can hardly interest you."

"How do you know that?"

"I guess it by your habitual character, dear duke. You are a light-hearted man of pleasure, frivolous and thoughtless. What do you care for our terrible tales, except that they first bore you and then make you yawn?"

"It's true that if I except some dozen affairs in which my sword has played its part, much as another's would have done, I have lived in the joyous indifference of a true philosopher. Nevertheless, what should you say if I could prove to you that what you have been telling of, is as nothing to what I have seen myself? and what would you say if I were able by what I could tell you to prevent your sleeping a wink from very horror?"

"You want to make us believe that?" said Pommereuil, yawning. "Well, well, out with your tale in your own way. Go on, my friend, you needn't be particular; I am dropping with sleep, and this will finish me."

"Is it very dreadful?" carelessly demanded the Marquis d'Alluye. "In that case I had better draw my sword beforehand. It is always as well to be on one's guard."

"Laugh as much as you please, my good friends, joke your fill . . . but, with all your assurance, have a care, for I swear to you that there is nothing gay about what I am going to tell."

"Was it very long ago?" demanded our hostess.

"It ought to be as old," said the Marquis d'Alluye, "as the times of Greece and Rome . . ."

"No . . . the period of the Crusades," cried Pommereuil.

"We won't go so far back as that," I said, without being put out of countenance; "the story is quite recent, and you were acquainted with the people."

At this everyone grew attentive, and I commenced:

"Did you know Sarrazin?"

"Is it in relation to the Crusades you fling this name at our heads? What Sarrazin are you talking about?"

"Of Sarrazin the poet."

"He who was at one time with M. de Comti?"

"Yes."

"The same who made the answer to Ménage, when he advised him to pay more attention to his wife, and to sleep with her: "It's all very well to talk like that! Take her yourself, if you want to."

"Exactly, that's the man."

"Zounds, we all know him!"

"Do you know how he died?"

"Suddenly enough."

"But of what illness?"

"Ah! you must ask his doctor if you want to know that."

"No! I alone know the real truth."

"Oh! tell us, tell us," cried Madame la Présidente; "I saw a great deal of poor Monsieur Sarrazin; he always made me laugh, and I regretted his death. We are all ears. Silence, gentlemen, I beg you."

"Married man as he was," I began, and I remarked that the circle of my audience was closing up—"married man as he was, Sarrazin was a fervent disciple of the god of love, and carried his sighs and his vows to one beauty after another. He fell violently in love with Madame Catelan."

At this name the general attention grew more intense.

"Madame Catelan, as you know, was a most agreeable woman; she had a reputation for wit and a thorough knowledge of the world. Unfortunately—I should say unfortunately for herself, because it was a real drawback—she had a very tender heart,

and couldn't help giving way to her whims. She had a whim for Sarrazin, and things went on so fast, and so little effort was made to hide them, that the secret soon got about ; I heard of it myself through an indiscretion of Monsieur de Candale."

"Tell us it," interrupted Pommereuil, who had been also very much smitten with little Madame Catelan.

"Patience . . . we shall hear all about him directly. His turn will come."

"Don't interrupt Roquelaure," cried our hostess.

"One day, or rather one evening, for it was striking six, and, being in the depth of winter, it was very dark, I had arrived from Flanders, where I had been campaigning for three months. I took but the time to change my riding costume and to get out of my jack-boots ; then, being anxious to embrace my friends, I rushed to the house of Marion Delorme, being certain that I should meet them there, and get a night's superior amusement into the bargain. All at once, in turning the corner of the Rue des Tournelles, I saw a window lighted up, whence came loud shouts of laughter.

"S'blood!" cried I to myself, "'tis there that Catelan lodges . . . here goes for Catelan."

I ascend, I ring, the door is opened.

Catelan rushes into my arms.

"Ah!" he cried. "It is that dear, that good, that delightful Roquelaure ! It needed but him to make my joy complete."

"You are enjoying yourself," said I to Catelan.

"I should think I was enjoying myself! You shall see for yourself. We have got a true friend here, a devoted friend; you know Sarrazin, the droll, the delightful, the witty! To-day he is in great vein, at his very best! Come in, come in."

I followed Catelan.

The table was still laid, but dinner was nearly over. Madame Catelan and Sarrazin were talking in whispers, but directly they saw me they jumped away from each other, rose, and advanced to meet me. But Sarrazin did not remain standing long; he sat down so suddenly that he very nearly fell, and Catelan cried out:

"Ah! The poet Sarrazin isn't much of a warrior! The wine is getting into his head. The more he talks the drunker he gets."

Sarrazin muttered an answer which I heard but imperfectly, but he seized his glass and emptied it at a single gulp.

Catelan roared with laughter.

"Oh, Sarrazin is amusing! He is amusing!"

I must confess that Sarrazin did not look particularly lively; his eyes seemed haggard, and he did not appear to understand when I spoke to him.

Then I looked at Madame Catelan.

She, too, was seated, and leant against the table. A stupid laugh was on her lips, and I could have sworn she was dying with sleep.

"Perhaps I am putting you out," said I to Catelan.
"Your wife seems to be fatigued . . . I'll be off."

"By no means, by no means; you must remain, Roquelaure. When one is in good company, one cannot remain too late. Besides, I have need of you."

"Of me?"

"Yes . . . of you."

"I am at your orders."

"Roquelaure, you are of good blood."

"My father, who knew all about it, used to say that the Roquelaures were the very pick of the pick of the basket of Gascony."

"Are you discreet?"

"As the gate of a cemetery."

"And if one had to confide to you a secret of the greatest importance? . . ."

"You could be quite sure that the secret would be as well guarded as a good French fortress by a good regiment of Frenchmen."

"Even if it concerned a man's honour or his life?"

"Even if it concerned a man's honour or his life."

"Have you weighed well your words, Monsieur de Roquelaure?"

"I have weighed them, as I always weigh them, in the unchangeable balance of my conscience, Monsieur Catelan."

"Then, whatever you may see, whatever you may hear here this evening, you swear not to reveal?"

"I swear it!"

"Sit down, then, and let us drink a glass of malvoisie together. Do you like malvoisie, Monsieur de Roquelaure?"

"Why not? I like any kind of wine, when it is good."

Madame Catelan, who seemed dropping with fatigue, turned towards her husband with a careless air:

"Why don't you offer Monsieur de Roquelaure some of that excellent Narbonne wine, which we have been drinking for the last week, and which you persistently refuse to taste?"

"The fact is that it is delicious," added Sarrazin, throwing himself back in his armchair.

"Let me taste the Narbonne wine," cried I, stretching out my glass to Catelan.

"No! not a bit of it, my dear Roquelaure; I want you to tell me what you think of the malvoisie. There . . . there you are . . . drink . . . your health."

"A thousand thanks!"

"My dear Monsieur de Roquelaure, while my wife and Sarrazin continue their conversation ('for you can go on chatting, my friends,' he added, breaking off to address them directly)—while they are continuing, let me ask you one question."

"Put your question, Catelan."

"What do you think of a husband who is deceived?"

I hardly expected anything of that sort. Catelan had, in this matter, a thoroughly well-established reputation. There could not be the least possible doubt as to him.

"Be frank," said he; "I expect the whole truth from you."

"Zounds! . . . you are asking something which is . . ."

"Embarrassing? So be it; but that is no reason for not answering. . . . I want your opinion on the matter."

I remained silent.

"Look here," began Catelan, "to put you quite at your ease, I will interrogate you. I ask you what you think of a husband who is deceived? Can there be anything more ridiculous?"

I laughed.

"And is not his very stupidity amusing?"

"It is so sometimes."

"The poor fellow is scouted, ridiculed, despised, and there is not a prig who does not think he has the right to make a joke of him. Is it not so?"

"I'faith! . . . it is possible that it may be so."

"You have been married, Roquelaure?"

"Oh! it was such a short while that I had not experience of that sort of thing."

"Everybody is not as fortunate as you have been, my dear Roquelaure, and I know of more than one who wishes he had had your luck."

"I beg pardon," said I to Catelan, "but please explain what there can be . . ."

"Between matters like this and your servant Catelan? I am going to tell you. Please to remember I have upon this earth a friend whom I love . . . as a second self. My poor friend has been disgracefully betrayed by his wife, and I have promised to avenge him.

"I haven't the honour of knowing your friend, my dear Catelan, but were he here, I should take the liberty of telling him that before taking vengeance, one should be quite sure of one's fact, and one should not act lightly. Appearances are often deceptive, particularly in these sort of matters."

"He, too, determined not to proceed to the last extremity," said Catelan, "until he had certain proofs. Listen, here is one of the lady's letters:

"My well-beloved, what a day and what a night! Twenty-four hours without seeing thee; that means torture! Twenty-four hours without embracing thee; that is death! Only fancy, I wouldn't get up this morning, in order to try to dream once again of thee. But the *nuisance* (that's how she calls the husband, my dear Roque-laure) coughed, shook the bed, and then got up, which put to flight half my lovely dreams, and I had to content myself with the reality. It was an ugly and unpleasant reality, I swear to thee, my well-beloved, for thou wert not there to sweeten its bitterness.

"Do not forget that I shall be alone to-morrow evening. Until thou arrivest, I shall not live. Until to-morrow, then, my heart and my life . . . until to-morrow."

While Catelan read, Madame Catelan rose from the table, staring in front of her, as though she were gazing at some sombre and menacing phantom.

Catelan put the letter in his pocket, and, taking out another one, said :

“ This is how the lover answers :

“ Beautiful darling, one day passed out of thy cherished sight is as insupportable to me as it is to thee. Thou knowest it is so, and that knowledge makes me happy. It seems to me that our *nuisance* is not content with tormenting us, but that he has become very sedentary. Try and persuade him, then, for the sake of his health, that he should go out, and that he should go out often. After all, we must try and make up for lost time. To-morrow evening I shall be with you at the usual time. Farewell, my beautiful love, until we meet once more ! I shall pray to Jupiter to give Time larger wings to-day, that he may conduct me to thee with the greatest speed. I shall beg him to-morrow to clip those of Cupid, that we may be all the longer together.”

As he listened to this gallant invocation to Jupiter, the countenance of Sarrazin changed ; he seemed to copy Madame Catelan’s movement. He rose from his chair and staggered to his feet.

I began to understand a portion of the truth, but I took care not to let Catelan suspect it, and turning towards him :

“ What would you suggest ? ” said I, with an appearance of coolness which I was far from feeling.

“ What would I suggest . . . you shall know anon. . . . But, in the first place, what’s the matter,

madame? And what's the matter with you, my dear Sarrazin? Has your dinner disagreed with you? Oh . . . my pigeons . . . a glass of water . . . that will put you all right at once."

"Oh . . . yes . . . water . . ." stammered the young wife stretching out her hand.

"Water, water . . ." repeated Sarrazin, whose teeth were chattering. And both at a single draught swallowed the water that Catelan poured out for them.

"What does all this mean?" cried I, springing to my feet, for the scene had taken a weird character which frightened and at the same time confounded me.

"It means," cried Catelan, in a voice of thunder, "that the scouted, despised, abused husband is myself! It means that these two lovers, an agreeable fragment of whose correspondence you have heard just now, are the beautiful Madame Catelan and the joyous poet Sarrazin! It means that everyone in this world has his turn; as they have had the laugh of me, so it is but just that I should have the laugh of them! Ah! but my laugh will be sadder than theirs, and will pursue them to hell itself!"

I no longer listened to Catelan; I caught his wife in my arms . . . I tried to chafe her limbs, which were gradually becoming icy cold; my horror took away my voice, I could not call for help . . . for it would have been too late.

Madame Catelan had only time to murmur :

"It is a week, an entire week, since this monster began to give me the poison of which I am now dying. . . . But . . . it is finished . . . my God . . . my God . . . I burn . . . water . . . pity . . . pity . . . I die ! "

And her body, stiffened by suffering, slipped from my hands and fell at my feet.

I turned towards Sarrazin. He still breathed, but his eyes were glazing.

A moment after, he was dead.

Catelan and I kept silence for an instant, but I soon broke it, saying :

"What has been the use, sir, of having made me the witness of such a spectacle ? "

"In order that there might be one man in the world, Monsieur de Roquelaure, who, notwithstanding what might be said about me in his presence, could never laugh at Catelan, the deceived husband."

"And were I to denounce you ? "

"You can do so ; there is nothing to prevent you except your word of honour as a nobleman."

It was true ! . . .

I had sworn . . . it was my duty to be silent.

I left the accursed house, like a real madman, without looking behind me.

What Catelan did, as soon as I was gone, I cannot say ; but what happened the next day was of a nature to astonish me considerably. A rumour

spread that Madame Catelan had died suddenly after a dinner, at which she seemed as she usually was, very witty and very gay. People said that, by a strange coincidence, Sarrazin died *at his own house* at the same time, after an attack which was set down to his bad digestion.

By what means Catelan had carried or caused to be carried to his own house the body of poor Sarrazin, I cannot tell. I never knew, and I do not think that the mystery will ever be disclosed. As long as Catelan lived, I considered myself bound by my oath; now that he is dead, I can tell my story.

"Now, gentlemen, and you, dear Madame la Présidente, answer :

"Does my story appear to you sufficiently tragic, and have I been able to make you shudder?"

"I am still trembling," said Madame la Présidente Aubry. "Poor Madame Catelan! . . . To die thus . . . and why, goodness knows."

"I don't think the game was worth the candle. I am quite of your opinion."

Little by little the conversation became more cheerful, and we all agreed on one point, that it was a very fortunate thing for humanity in general, and the ladies in particular, that all husbands are not like Catelan.

"If they all accepted his ideas," said Pommereuil, "Roquelaure would have been a dead man long ago."

"But the husbands I have deceived wouldn't have been any the better off, would they?"

"It is very true!" cried the Marquis d'Alluye.

"A health to inconstant wives," said D'Orgeval.

"A health to accommodating husbands," added Pommereuil. "Catelan was but a fool!"

We separated with that philosophic conclusion, to which everyone acceded.

I had come to President Aubry's house without my chairmen. Madame de Bacqueville, a *young* lady of forty years of age, who still possessed the remains of beauty, offered me a place in her coach, which I did not like to refuse. This Madame de Bacqueville, who had shown great emotion in listening to the story of Madame Catelan, was the most lackadaisical person it was possible to conceive; she had considerable pretensions, notwithstanding her age, to good looks, and this rendered her rather terrible.

In order to follow up her usual tactics, Madame de Bacqueville did not give me a moment's peace the whole evening. She thought it amusing to talk to me about her husband, to whom she had given, I fancy, a good deal of trouble; luckily for her, he was a milder man than the ferocious Catelan. She thought, perhaps, to compel my admiration by her affectations, but she got nothing by them, I did not move . . . though the curtains of her carriage were closely drawn, and her two old white horses were going at an extremely slow pace.

If I had been twenty years of age, perhaps I should have been caught by her little tricks of coquetry. But I had arrived at that age when one becomes

rather discriminating, and when the fact that one cares for a woman is far more flattering to her.

I had now reached my fortieth year, and yet the dominant taste, of which these memoirs have betrayed the secret, was in no way enfeebled. But I was more circumspect, and I chose my playthings with more discretion.

The arts and graces of Madame de Bacqueville left me as cold as marble.

Yet I could not help laughing at the dizain which the poet Maynard made on her, though I think he was wrong in being quite so brutal, a fault which I do not pardon when addressed to that charming sex which has furnished me with so many happy hours and glorious remembrances.

Alix no more my heart can touch,
I have revolted from her thrall,
I used to love her overmuch,
But now, alas! I can't at all.
Her teeth, once pearls, are getting black,
Alas! her hair is coming out,
Her nose is getting red, alack!
It *was* a nose—it *is* a snout.
She coughs! with grief my heart is wrung.
I wish she would cough up her tongue!

CHAPTER LX

A glance over the events of the time—Character of Louis XIV.—Conquest of Flanders—A stay at Saint-Germain—My position at court—My own affairs—I reach my fiftieth birthday—Certain reflections on that period of life—Parallel between the coquettish woman and the free-liver—Different conclusions drawn from the diversity of human nature—Looking back—Remembrances and regrets—Rounds of consolation—It is well to look at the pleasant side of things—My mirror—A short instructive dialogue between myself and the foregoing—An evening at the Marchioness de Gouvill's—A full-length portrait—Madame Cornuel's joke against me—Wit has no pity—The play-table—Midnight—The ball—A masked woman—Mystery—Madame la Marquise de Brévannes—All is explained.

AFTER the death of Cardinal Mazarin, which personally I was very much grieved at, intrigues became very frequent at court. The king being about twenty-two years of age, women fancied they could rule him easily, and in the early part of his reign it appeared that this hope was not unlikely to be realised, because the young king had, in a way, wanted to offer half the throne to his first mistress. The very courtiers flattered themselves with the hope of ruling him through his favourites; but such illusions were soon dispelled. Louis XIV. took upon himself the entire burden of affairs.

He was a king indeed.

Thanks to the excellent administrations of Colbert and De Louvois, France had again taken the place which was her due upon the seas, while the army was well officered and well disciplined. The great campaign of Flanders showed, in the year 1667, what might be expected of the valour and intrepidity of the French soldiery. Charleroy, Tournay, Furnes, Armentières, Courtrai, yielded in succession; and the taking of Lille, after a nine days' siege, was the glorious finale of this magnificent expedition.

The king, when he returned from that campaign, which had carried fear and trembling into the hearts of all his enemies, stayed at Saint-Germain.

I possessed a little property there. It was from this period that I really entered into His Majesty's royal favour.

Never had I seen the court pass so joyous a winter season. The popularity of Louis XIV. was at its height; the affection which the people had for him was universal. In the precarious condition in which Europe was at that time, it was easy to see that France would be called upon to play an important part.

Spain was delivered over to a queen-regent and her confessor; Germany had expended her last resources in a fierce and bloody war against Turkey; and England, weakened by intestinal troubles, had but recently had her capital decimated by pestilence

and conflagration. France alone, young, standing erect upon the spoils she had gained, under the command of a chivalrous and proud king, felt herself strong enough to become the queen of the world.

A member of all the king's orders of chivalry since the year 1661, I was continually in His Majesty's personal service. My enemies, at last recognising their impotence, had ceased to fatigue me with their wearying persecutions. Not that they felt for me any particular, tender affection, but my sovereign's favour had been purchased too publicly and too legitimately for them to dare to attempt an injurious control over the bounties of which I was the object.

I tranquilly enjoyed the reward of the numerous services I had rendered the monarchy, and the slanderings and belittlings of interested persons gradually ceased, on account of the openly-declared favour of the king.

I was no longer in my first youth.

It may be remembered I was born in 1617.

The date to which these memoirs have brought us now corresponds approximately with the year 1666.

I was now very nearly fifty.

For men who have had some success, as well as for women whose beauty has won renown, it is an age difficult to pass.

Woman, the principal object of whose life has been coquetry, cannot learn to accustom herself to the idea that a man can pass her by without a

covetous look, that she may be present at a ball without being asked to dance, that she can wear a low dress without anyone wanting to admire her shoulders, that she may speak and yet no one will applaud, and that when she enters a room not a head will be turned in her direction.

Her change of position is absolutely the same as that of a queen on her abdication.

But yesterday she possessed a kingdom, hundreds of towns, thousands of subjects, an army of courtiers; to-day she has nothing but rude servants who make her feel all the reality of her fall.

Poor fallen queen! Poor dethroned coquette! The one has brutal friends, the other an impertinent mirror, and both speak the truth to them.

I confess I have always felt great pity for these two queens who lose their empire in this way. I am not sure that I do not feel more real compassion for the woman who has grown old than for the empress who abdicates. The one has, at all events, the remembrance of her former omnipotence and grandeur, and those memories are imperishable; the other has but the ruins of her beauty . . . and what are the ruins of beauty to a woman! Who troubles about them? Who admires them? Who looks at them? To say, in seeing one of the departed stars of the court, "Surely you remember how handsome she was!" is to bring a blush to her cheek, to deal her a dagger-stroke.

Man is by no means so unfortunate. Doubtless he no longer possesses that juvenile freshness which gained for him those tender glances of which he has so often dreamed in nights of flame and of delirium; doubtless he is no longer the cynosure of all those adorable coquettes who, without loving in the least little bit, think it an honour to attract him to their own following, be it but for a week, or for a day, or even for an hour; doubtless he is no longer the indispensable hero of every fête, the cherished cavalier of every beauty, the man who is envied by a thousand rivals. . . .

Doubtless he is forgotten a little.

But he does not forget himself, not he.

Man has this to his credit, that in growing old, he still remains a man, while there comes a time when a woman is a little less than a woman, and then the day arrives that she is no longer a woman at all. The man who grows old has learnt much of the science of love, and he is allowed to profit by his science. The warmth of a man's feelings, far from growing less, acquires possibly a greater energy, which, though more under control, is none the less real; and if the charming sex, whose adorer he still is, does not accord him so public and marked an esteem, it is rare indeed that he does not receive from time to time some compensations. Innocent hearts often yield to the amorous experience of the man whose hair has grown white in these sorts of

battles. The coquette herself, without openly showing her preference, cannot refuse her favour, the secret of which she knows will be religiously kept to the man who for so long a time has burned incense at her altar.

I, less than any man, had the pretension to be an exception to the generality of the human race. I am neither better nor worse, nor more courageous, nor more resigned than other men.

At first I was like the rest of the world.

It frightened me to have reached the age of fifty.

How I looked back with regret upon the past !

I went over in my mind all the pleasures, all the enjoyments with which fortune, I must say, had so generously gratified me.

I thought of the excellent Madame de Lavernay, who had so coolly sacrificed little Croixville to me ; of Madame de Guéménée, over whom I had so luckily triumphed when I pretended to mistake her for her maid Pelloquin ; of Madame d'Alibon, who gave me that favourable opportunity at her window, well-nigh in the presence of her ass of a husband ; of Madame de Lesdiguières, whose love was so tender, and whose friendship so perfect ; of Madame Corbin, the charming little bourgeoisie of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, who proved to me that they know how to love just as well in town as at court ; of Madelon Tiquet, whose husband I had replaced on his very bridal night ; of pretty Madame Tambonneau, who one day had

laughed so much that she could refuse me nothing I asked for ; of my wife, so fondly loved and so quickly taken from me . . . in fine, of many others whose names are written down in these my memoirs, just as they are engraven upon my heart.

What a review! What a seductive aureola! My eyes were dazzled. . . .

As my mind grew calm, I asked myself:

“Am I obliged to abdicate? Is my reign really over?”

At this double question my pride turned head over heels.

“And why should I abdicate?” I answered, with the dignity of a monarch who declines to show his hand. “Why should I, myself, break the sceptre which so many white and pretty hands have helped me to carry? Am I a paralytic—lame, wheezy, bowed? Is my blood poisoned? Have I infirmities which force me to go to bed early, make me take cooling draughts or use clysters?”

“No! A thousand times no!”

“Quite the contrary.

“I have a firm foot and an excellent eye.”

To see well and to walk well, assuredly these are the two first conditions of love.

As for my heart, I do not know if it is wrinkled, but I am quite sure it is in robust health; it beats the regulation number of pulsations every minute, it beats harder when it is necessary, and when neces-

sary it can even beat more slowly. When I see a pretty puppet, I feel it dance as though I were but five-and-twenty. . . . I have still a pronounced taste for deeds of daring and generous sentiments. I love the country, a fine view, the freshness of the forest, the babbling of the brook ; in fact, I love everything which rouses my imagination and stimulates my dreaming fancies. What is there wanting, then, to enable me to continue fulfilling all the conditions of a nature inclined to every kind of tenderness ? Nothing, it seems to me.

There is yet another thing ; I have, perhaps, ten or fifteen years to live. . . .

Ah ! pardieu ! One must help oneself ; and do not love matters constitute themselves among the members of the whole human race into a sort of common liability which ought to cause us all to overlook certain inconveniences which we cannot master, and to close our eyes over blemishes from which we know that sooner or later we shall suffer ourselves ?

Such were the arguments which I used to soften the bitterness of this part of the journey in a man's life, which is so difficult to take. To tell the truth, they completely consoled me, and my philosophy made me feel younger than ever.

I remember how I asked myself all these different questions, as though it were but yesterday. I remember, too, the beneficent influence which my resolutions had upon my self-esteem.

To console myself thoroughly, I had recourse to sufficiently childish means, which well-nigh spoiled everything.

I went into my dressing-room and I looked into my mirror.

And then my ideas were considerably modified.

Mirrors are not courtiers; they have a language of their own, which the deafest could not fail to hear; they have a way of expressing themselves which would remove all doubt from the mind of the most undecided or frivolous.

This looking-glass, without troubling itself in the slightest about the laws of politeness, told me in a whisper that my nose, formerly slightly broad, had now come to considerably resemble a fan; that my forehead was lined with certain little furrows the jealous or bad-intentioned persons would assuredly take for actual wrinkles; that my eyes, whose eyelids were creased, were not as bright as they once were; that the tip of my chin had grown rather pointed; that my cheeks hung down outrageously; that the hairs of my beard were growing white; that my hair were getting like the hairs of my beard; that my mouth had lost that fresh colour which had enabled it to pass muster till now; that, in one word, my head had no sort of resemblance to that of an Apollo or Narcissus, and that, finally, I was no longer the joyous, the frivolous, the brilliant nobleman of other days.

All these truths were hard to bear, a fact which did not prevent the mirror from hurling them in my face without the slightest mercy, one after the other.

I confess I felt considerably shaken for the moment by the unflattering little avalanche of hard things to which I was unable to give an answer.

But soon plucking up my courage, and addressing a last questioning look to the insolent mentor who had hurled at me so mortifying a procession of ideas, I regained assurance and became resigned.

This face, which had been so cruelly treated, did not seem to be so disagreeable as it had appeared at first. I saw once more in it smartness and biting wit, and a certain expression of laughing malignity which had survived the assaults of Time. My figure had retained a sort of elegance, and the perfect health which I enjoyed gave to my whole personality an air of satisfaction that was not unattractive.

"Bah!" cried I, by way of conclusion, and in order to answer all the objections that my modesty could oppose; "in this sort of matters to reason is nothing, to act is everything. S'death, let us act! . . . and we shall see whether we are capable of pleasing, yes or no!"

And thereupon I went on with my toilet, and, thoroughly satisfied with the result, I went off to the house of the Marchioness de Gouville to pass my evening.

It was a very gay house, and the rooms were

always crowded. I found there Madame de Brégis, whose beauty had considerably faded, and who, people said, was then seriously thinking of turning devotee; there were the Duchess de Richelieu, Madame de Castelnau, M. d'Humières, and Madame Cornuel.

It was a very long time since I had been at Madame de Gouvillè's.

My entrance was saluted by a round of applause, at which I confess that I felt infinitely flattered.

It will be seen why and wherefore this *soirée* of the marchioness's, at which nothing very remarkable took place, has always remained marked in my memory.

I was the victim of an unpleasant enough witticism, and chance willed it that, without desiring it, I should engage in one of the most agreeable intrigues of which I have ever been the hero.

The conversation had chanced, I know not why, on the mania that people had of having their portraits painted full-length and of life-size; everyone was called upon to give his or her opinion. Madame de Castelnau, who had just had her portrait painted, declared she had the best possible reasons for being depicted in this way, and she took up the cudgels for her opinions, saying that a half-length was not really a portrait, but merely a presentment of one-half of yourself, and that half very badly shown; besides, it made one look as if one had been cut in two. M.

d'Humières agreed with Madame de Castelnau, and declared his intention of ordering a full-length portrait of himself and making his wife a present of it on her birthday, which was not far off.

"I perfectly understand your reasons," said I to D'Humières. "You are one of the best supporters of the army, dear marquis, and everyone will allow that *you* have every possible right to the distinction of which you judge yourself worthy. But after all, conscientiously, don't you think there is something very laughable in this singular mania that even the paltriest procureur at the Châtelet has, now-a-days, to sit for his portrait, as if he were one of the noble offspring of the great nobility of France, made glorious at one and the same time by their ancestors' valour and the brilliancy of their own exploits? I think that it is a crying abuse against which every man of wit, who is worth his salt, should protest."

At this point of my oration I perceived that I had very much shocked, without having the slightest intention of doing so, one of the wittiest women of her time; I mean Madame Cornuel. In fact, my remark was very severe upon her, because the little weakness which I was attacking so vehemently might be put down to her father, who had in his house as many as three full-length oil-paintings of himself, in which he appeared as a mighty conqueror, though he was a person of small importance, having been the steward of the late M. de Guise.

Thereupon, trying to repair as quickly as possible

the stupidity of which I had been guilty, I blurted out, bringing myself upon the *tapis* :

“ I ask you, madame, if in the matter in which we are occupied one ought not to first consider the intrinsic value of one’s own personality? Take my case, for instance; I have always recoiled from an honour which I should consider undeserved; I contented myself with just a head and bust, which you may have seen in the great room in my house at Saint-Germain, and, in fact, if I wanted to-day, I, who am not yet a marshal of France, like my father, to give myself the glories of a full-length, and to take in a picture with a gilded frame the attitude of a statue, would not you look upon it as supremely ridiculous? I take you all to witness! The portrait of Roque-laure, draped as a Roman emperor, would it not make the merry and those who are fond of fun laugh? What would it be like? Nothing on earth! . . .”

“ Oh, yes, it would!” said Madame Cornuel, looking at me out of the corner of her eye. “ Oh, yes it would; if you added a tail, it would be like a monkey!”

Notwithstanding the friendship which everyone had for me, Madame Cornuel’s joke was received with universal applause. Those who had been annoyed by my frankness were not sorry to be avenged then and there, and I was overwhelmed with an avalanche of quibbles, to which, owing to their number and confusion, it was difficult to reply.

I had to confess myself vanquished, and I was

glad to escape into the next room, where some very high play was going on.

I sat down to a biribi-table, fully determined to avenge Madame Cornuel's little snubbing on the purses of my adversaries.

I succeeded in doing so, and I was already congratulating myself on the visible protection accorded to me by blind Fortune, the goddess of chance, when I heard the clock strike midnight.

It was the hour at which dancing was to commence, and already numbers of masked guests filled the the Hôtel de Gouville.

Dancing no longer suited my age, and I should not have left the tables, where I was much amused, if a soft voice had not whispered in my ear, pronouncing with mystery and timidity a simple appeal, to which I felt compelled to respond.

“Will Monsieur de Roquelaure be good enough to do me a favour?”

I turned my head quickly, and I saw a lady slightly masked leaning over the back of my chair.

The lady had superb black hair and a lovely white skin.

I arose with alacrity.

A second examination made me still more favourably inclined towards this handsome creature. . . . I say handsome, for her shoulders, her bosom, her arms—in fact, all that one could see, were of incontestable perfection.

"What can I do for you, madame? Have I the honour of knowing you?"

"You can do a great deal for me," she answered, "though as yet we have never met."

"But you have seen me somewhere?"

"I meet you to-day for the first time."

"'Tis my reputation, then?"

"Precisely. I know that you have a good heart, that devotion is a part of your nature, and that when there is a service to be done, that you do not know how to refuse to do it. That is why I have come to you. Was I wrong?"

"I beg you to give me the opportunity of proving the contrary."

"Well, then, follow me."

"Willingly. . . . Will you take my arm?"

"I was going to ask for it."

"Whither shall I conduct you?"

"Into the middle of the crowd, wherever the company is thickest; I will tell you why."

Madame de Gouville was at that moment in the middle of her salon, doing the honours of her entertainment to the numerous guests, who entered in a continuous stream from the door.

Soon the sound of violins was heard, and the dancers began to seek their partners.

"Would you like to dance, madame?" said I to my unknown. "Although I am no longer young, I may perhaps serve as well as another; only for a

saraband or a pavane you might probably find someone more suitable."

"I have no wish to dance," she replied. "Come with me into the embrasure of this window; I see two empty chairs; let us sit down, and I will explain what it is I want of you."

"But cannot I know even who you are?"

"I am . . . in fact, why should I hide it from you? I am the Marchioness de Brévannes."

"A relative of Madame de Saintôt's."

"Exactly."

"All your friends are friends of mine, marchioness; may I add myself to their number?"

"That rests with you, Monsieur de Roquelaure."

"Then we can take hands," said I, suiting the action to the word.

We exchanged a furtive squeeze of the hand and we sat down. Luckily, everyone was so taken up with the dancing that nobody took the slightest notice of us.

CHAPTER LXI

Continuation of the entertainment at the Marchioness de Gouville's—The Marchioness de Brévannes—Her description—The Countess de Choisy—Indiscreet questions—Ought I to answer?—Scruples and struggles—I devote myself to Madame de Brévannes—Jealousy—Reflections on this unfortunate passion—Philosophical reasonings—I am hardly listened to—Doubt and certainty—A woman deceived by her husband—How shall she revenge herself—Conjectures on this subject—A dialogue between two guilty parties—A kiss in the dark—Organised surveillance—The two coaches.

MADAME DE BRÉVANNES and I were like those sentinels who are placed along the beach at seaport-towns.

We appeared to be on the watch.

Isolated from the crowd, which laughed and joked and chatted, we observed in silence.

In spite of myself, I somehow felt obliged to imitate Madame de Brévannes. She looked on, I looked on, as she did; she shuddered, I shuddered too.

In addition, as can be fancied, I was singularly puzzled.

Madame de Gouville came to us two or three times to reproach us for laziness.

"Charming fair one," she said, addressing Madame de Brévannes, "I do not know who you are, but it is

easy to see that you could be, if you would, one of our most charming dancers. Not indisposed, I hope ? ”

Madame de Brévannes shook her head.

“ And you, Monsieur de Roquelaure, you are very wrong to be the accomplice of such a desertion. This pretty mask’s place is in the middle of the dancers, and you are wrong to take advantage of your being a retired dancer by keeping your poor victim at your side.”

“ I am incapable of such tyranny, dear marchioness; I but fulfil the functions of a respectful and submissive cavalier, that is all. I but execute the orders given me, too happy to be treated as a *slave* by a *mistress* so adorable ! ”

“ Ah, ah ! you play upon words in a highly improper way,” said the Marchioness de Gouville with a smile.

“ As the thing itself is impossible, there can be no impropriety in the joke. For now Roquelaure is a person of no importance ; he may get certain little private favours, which in a way console him for what he has lost.”

“ Though you have grown old, you still have some pretensions to youth,” said Madame de Gouville as she turned away, “ and notwithstanding your age, which ought to make you respectable, I shouldn’t care to trust you altogether ! ”

During this short dialogue, Madame de Brévannes never opened her lips, and seemed to be searching

for someone in the crowd. All at once she clutched my arm.

"What is it?"

"There," she said, "look . . . down there . . . the pair who have just come in."

I cast my eyes in the direction indicated.

"Well?"

"Ah! it is true . . . you do not know that man."

"No."

"It is the Marquis de Brévannes."

"Your husband?"

"My husband."

"I beg to offer you my compliments, he is very nice-looking."

In reality the marquis had a very distinguished appearance. Aged about six-and-thirty to seven-and-thirty, rather thick-set but very well-shaped, he was one of those men, manly and gentle at the same time, who easily inspire love. He was dressed with much taste, and carried himself with perfect grace.

The marchioness did not seem to be very particularly preoccupied with the perfectly disinterested eulogy which I had just vouchsafed of her husband. She was evidently possessed of a single thought which prevented her troubling about such trifles.

What occupied her mind was, not her husband, but the woman he had upon his arm.

"Who is that woman?" she asked me. . . . "Do you know her?"

"Of course I know her ! It is Madame la Comtesse de Choisy."

"Ah ! Really, you are quite sure ? "

"I haven't the slightest doubt."

"Monsieur de Roquelaure, according to you, is that women *very* handsome ? "

"She is dark . . . and in my eyes that goes a great way."

"Ah ! you admire dark women."

"Pray do not think I am paying you a compliment," said I to Madame de Brévannes, who had the loveliest black hair it is possible to imagine. "I always say what I think, nothing more, nothing less."

"But this Choisy woman, what does she say, what does she do, in society ? "

"She sometimes says very witty things, marchioness, and she is very often guilty of nameless extravagances. She has a very comic way of speaking, and it is impossible to hear the unexpected things she says without laughing. As for what she does . . . it would be very difficult for me . . ."

"Why so ? "

"Phew . . . because I don't think it would be very delicate of me . . ."

"To reveal certain dishonourable details ? "

"Ah ! excuse me . . ."

"Ah, but that is what you were going to say ! Now, confess it ? "

"Marchioness! marchioness! you press me in a way . . ."

"But I want to know the truth."

"I ask no better than to tell it you . . . but . . ."

"But me, no buts. . . . I came to you rather than to anyone else, because I thought you would hide nothing from me. Madame de Choisy . . . heavens! I can't express myself, it is so difficult! Let me see . . . is Madame de Choisy a sort of woman . . . to have . . ."

"To have? . . ." repeated I, staring in astonishment.

"A lover?"

She uttered the word as though alarmed at her own daring.

I saw her blush under her mask.

"Ahem! Well! The question is a delicate one, and my scruples . . ."

The Marchioness de Brévannes was impatiently awaiting my answer; seeing that I did not reply all at once, she let her chin fall upon her chest sadly, and it seemed to me that she was about to make an effort to leave me.

Then a sudden remorse seized me. I was in one of those difficult situations from which one can only escape by a vigorous resolution. I had to choose between Madame de Brévannes and Madame de Choisy; I had to side with one or the other. Then I examined carefully and most conscientiously to which of

them I was most bound. It is true that I hardly knew Madame de Brévannes, and I had met Madame de Choisy frequently; but after thinking the thing over, I felt that I had no serious obligations, save to the one who had come frankly to me to ask a friend's assistance. Madame de Choisy was in my eyes, I may as well confess, a little fool, whose reputation had been considerably damaged already, and to whom a scandal more or less would make no difference whatever. In spite of every consideration which could make me inclined to be charitable, I decided to satisfy Madame de Brévannes.

"You want to know," said I to her in a low tone, "if Madame de Choisy is capable of having a lover? . . ."

Once more she turned towards me, and waited for my words with feverish avidity.

"Well, I cannot say no to that question."

"And just now do you know if, perhaps . . . she loves someone? . . ."

"Oh! I don't think her heart is an exclusive one, and I don't think it so avaricious as to award all the favours it has to dispose of to one man alone."

"Look, Monsieur de Roquelaure," interrupted she, grasping my arm convulsively . . . "look, how she is whispering to him . . . how close she is getting to him . . . and how he admires her . . . how he is devouring her with his eyes! . . . Heaven pardon me! if there was not such a crowd they would kiss each other!"

This last sentence enlightened me. I understood everything.

The Marchioness de Brévannes was jealous, madly jealous, and ready to sacrifice everything to this idiotic jealousy of hers.

Nothing which concerned love-matters was unknown to my heart. I had gone through it all, the sweetest and the most cruel sensations, the lover's vexation, his anger and his happiness, the delights of satisfied passion, and the torments of jealousy. . . .

I knew the remedy for this kind of ill.

I made a pretence at first of pitying the sufferings of Madame de Brévannes. I pitied her; I severely blamed the husband who could expose his wife in this way to humiliating raileries, and my summing up was all in favour of her weakness. But, after having flattered this dangerous tendency of her mind, I changed my plans with marvellous rapidity, and I commenced to demolish the structure which I myself had just built up. Shall I say that I have found any new or powerful means of consoling the marchioness? No; on the contrary, I contented myself with one of those simple plans which, when properly used, never fails to produce its effect. I tried to persuade her, with a well-worn truth, i'faith, that appearances in this world are always deceitful, and unless one wished to be grossly deceived, one should never judge by what one saw. I repeated, among other pretty things of the same kind, that men loved

to flirt with nice-looking women, but that very often it meant nothing at all ; that Madame de Choisy was a notorious flirt, but that, nevertheless, more than one of her intrigues had turned out to be but pure and simple friendships after all ; that, finally, one ought to be very circumspect about thoughtlessly throwing the handle after the hatchet, that is, one should not take too much for granted.

I am quite sure that everyone will agree with this honest philosophy. Madame de Brévannes herself could but acknowledge the justice of my reasons, if she would only take the trouble to listen to them.

But after I had been preaching for five minutes with extraordinary eloquence, I perceived that I might as well have whistled to the wind.

“ You are not listening to me ! ” said I.

“ What’s the good ! I understand all that you would say to console me. But I have no need of such drugs, which only make my illness incurable. Yes, I am jealous, you have said the word, but I wish to make sure of the reality of my misfortune ; as yet I have only suspected . . . I must be certain. I want to be sure that I am not deceiving myself.”

“ And if you find out that you have accused him wrongfully ? ”

“ Then I shall love him once more, as much as ever.”

“ Whereas, if he is really guilty ? ”

“ In that case, I shall see what will be the course to take.”

That last answer reassured me as to the future of my disconsolate beauty. I had expected to hear her readiness to offer up her life as a sacrifice to her misfortune and to promise to die, if her suspicions were confirmed . . . not a bit of it ! . . . In the supposition of the dreadful certainty, she contented herself with saying that *she would see what would be the course to take.*

There was a great deal in those simple words; what a future they might conceal !

Let me hasten, however, to say that I only attributed to her words a meaning strictly conforming to the rules of innocence and honour, for Madame de Brévannes, whose merits I had often heard of, from tongues little given to indulgence, was a model of virtue.

The emotion which she felt at the mere idea that her husband could have a mistress, was in my eyes the most convincing proof of this.

Brévannes and Madame de Choisy, who were very far from supposing that the eyes of Argus were watching them so closely, went about from room to room, mingled in all the games, danced in the quadrille, and were everywhere greeted with a murmur of approbation. The lady was so pretty, the cavalier was so elegant, that people found it impossible not to do justice to so perfect a couple. Little remarks were made. The marchioness did not hear them, perhaps, but she guessed them all the same, and each moment she grew pale and blushed alternately.

I made immense efforts to distract her for well-nigh two hours, while the continual whirl and movement of the ball continued. But her preoccupation was too much for me, and I could hardly extract from her more than a few monosyllables, uttered in a tone which showed at times a profound grief, at times a violent despair. Only, as the Marchioness de Gouvillon continually came and begged her to take some little share in the pleasures of the evening, Madame de Brévannes at length rose, and taking my arm, took two or three turns round the room. In these short walks we were continually coming across De Brévannes and little Madame de Choisy.

It was about two o'clock in the morning, when, in passing behind them, we heard her whisper in the ear of her faithful cavalier these three too significant words :

“ Suppose we go ? ”

“ Oh, cruel one ! ” said Brévannes ; “ that is what I have been begging you to do for the last hour ; you wouldn't listen to me. You know perfectly well I am bored to death here.”

“ That is not exactly true,” said Madame de Choisy, “ for I know that you are a bit of a swaggerer, and I am ready to bet that in your heart of hearts you are congratulating yourself on not having altogether wasted your evening.”

“ How so ? ”

“ You don't understand ? ”

"'Pon honour!"

"Very well, I say, dear Brévannes, that, with your character, you ought to be thoroughly satisfied, for you have frightfully compromised me."

"I?"

"Oh, play the innocent! Why, you've never left me the whole night!"

"That is because, dear countess, there is no other woman to whom I would sacrifice the most precious things in the world, my love and my time."

"Don't lean over me like that," said Madame de Choisy, turning away her head a little; "everybody is looking at us, and it seems to me that while they look they whisper."

"They envy me my good luck," answered Brévannes. "Let them whisper. Here below everyone has his chance; some are happy, while others grow jealous."

"It is true," remarked Madame de Choisy, with difficulty repressing a titter, "that all those women seem to be bombarding me with their eyes. If I were a fortress, my dear marquis, not one stone of me would remain upon another."

"That is exactly why we oughtn't to stop any longer. I must save you from that danger; let us go."

"Yes . . . but quietly, so as not to attract attention. . . . The marchioness might detain us, and we should find it difficult to get away."

Brévannes and the Countess de Choisy slackened

their pace, and then sauntered away to examine a family group which was hanging above a door communicating with the outer hall. They had not perceived that we had overheard their conversation without losing a syllable of it. An instant afterwards they went out.

"Nobody noticed our flight," cried Madame de Choisy; "we are safe. . . ."

"To celebrate the happy event, countess, I kiss you."

And Brévannes did as he said.

"Imprudent man!" said Madame de Choisy.

"Bah! there is only a half-light in this passage."

"What! Don't you see that here is somebody?"

As a matter of fact, two people approached. They called the footman and asked for their cloaks.

These two persons were the Marchioness de Brévannes, still masked, and I, my features fully disclosed.

The little Choisy, who had never very much liked (I know not why precisely) to find herself face to face with me, turned away her head, hurriedly muffling it in a hood, and went out, hanging on De Brévanne's arm. He didn't even take the trouble to call for his lackey.

We had not an instant to lose, for Madame de Brévannes whispered in my ear:

"I want to follow them."

"To follow them? . . . so be it."

"Are you ready Monsieur de Roquelaure?"

"Let us go down."

When we reached the street, we saw Brévannes and Madame de Choisy get into a hired carriage and start off at a trot. A dealer would not have given twenty pistoles for their pair of horses.

Then, turning to my coachman, I said:

"Picard, you see that shandrydan ahead of you?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Good! Don't lose sight of it. Follow it at a distance of fifty paces, and when it stops do you do the same."

"I understand, monseigneur."

And Picard slashed his pair, which, putting aside an owner's vanity, were worth a good deal more than the horses that were dragging our guilty pair.

I sat down beside Madame de Brévannes, and I asked her how she felt.

"Better," said she; "I am beginning to get used to the idea which tormented me so. But, Monsieur de Roquelaure, do you think he loves her?"

"How can one reply to that about another which one would hardly dare to answer about oneself?"

"You are right, time alone will reveal that mystery. In the meanwhile, I begin to feel better to a certain extent."

"That's as it should be, for she's a worthless woman. As for him . . ."

"Oh! He! . . ."

She uttered the exclamation in a tone in which I discovered a spice of anger . . .

“Do you hate him enough never to pardon him?”

“On the contrary, I never felt so much disposed to indulgence.”

“Do you love him then in spite of all? . . .”

“Undeceive yourself, Monsieur de Roquelaure,” she answered, with a calmness of which I should not have believed her capable; “in this affair my pride is much more ruffled than my love. In an hour, perhaps, I shall arrive at contempt.”

As she uttered these words, she seemed to me much overcome. I took her hand. She offered no resistance.

The two coaches continued their course.

CHAPTER LXII

The Rue Plâtrière—Madame de Brévannes and I on watch in the street—A suspicious house—Resolute women—At three o'clock in the morning—We hire a room for the rest of the night—Lookers-on—The Marquis de Brévannes and the Countess de Choisy favour us with a remarkable performance—Amorous assaults—Details of gallantry—A nervous crisis—Things get better—A reasonable conversation—An ingenious sketch of jealousy looked on as a passion—A formal discussion—The doctors of the Sorbonne could not do better—We are tempted of the devil—Brévannes and Madame de Choisy again—The contagiousness of example—The theory of vengeance—The putting into practice of the theory—The return of youth—Ten minutes' happiness—An eye for an eye.

WE proceeded thus for about half-an-hour.

All of a sudden our coachman stopped.

"What is it, Picard?"

"Monseigneur, did you not order me to imitate the movements of the coachman ahead."

"Yes."

"The coach has stopped, monseigneur."

"And what place is this?"

"The Rue Plâtrière, monseigneur; we are fifty paces from the Hôtel d'Epéron."

Picard jumped lightly down from his box and flung down the steps.

I got out first.

Madame de Brévannes sprang out, and I caught her in my arms.

The night was fine and warm, for we were in the month of September; the summer had been very late that year; the stars sparkled brightly in the sky, and it was not dark enough to prevent one seeing objects distinctly. The marchioness's mask fell off, and I was able from that moment to judge how criminally Brévannes had behaved in taking the love his wife deserved so well elsewhere. I also made this reflection that he might have chosen better, for the little Choisy, though doubtless a witty creature, was fit enough for a caprice with which a nobleman might choose to amuse himself, but for whose sake he would be wrong indeed to sacrifice the least part of his consideration or his honour.

These reflections, rather out of place at such a moment, were interrupted by the natural course of events.

I offered my arm to the marchioness, and after having ordered Picard to remount his box and wait for us, we proceeded in the direction of the coach which had brought Brévannes and Madame de Choisy.

"Look," said the marchioness to me, ". . . they are going into that house . . . they don't separate . . . listen . . . my husband has knocked twice . . . they are opening the door . . . they have gone in!"

She uttered these last words in a sad and melancholy tone.

But soon she recovered her energies.

"Come," she said in a trembling voice, "I wish to know to which storey they have gone."

"It will be the easiest thing in the world," said I, leading Madame de Brévannes towards the house.

"There is no light at any of the windows, and the one that is lit up will tell us what we want to know."

"That's it," said she, "let us wait."

The house, it may be said parenthetically, had not a very honest appearance; not that it was ugly . . . on the contrary, the freshly-whitened walls showed that it had recently been put in order, and nothing of the outside could give one an idea of evil repute. And yet one felt, on looking at it attentively, that those walls had sheltered more than one mystery and possibly hidden more than one theft. It might have been a convent. . . . But what sort of convent? Good heavens! . . . One of those convents which are placed under the protection of tender Venus; and where the only divinity really recognised is that of Master Cupid.

While, rightly or wrongly, I came to these conclusions, the light appeared.

It was on the second floor. Through the white muslin blinds, which were only stretched across the two lower panes, we saw three moving shadows, which assuredly were no other than those of our two lovers

and probably that of the hostess, who played her little innocent part of complaisant and discreet introducer.

Five minutes passed.

Madame de Brévannes did not move.

She simply stared fixedly at the lighted window.

"Marchioness," I began, to end the state of suspense, "you must unhappily recognise that your suspicions were only too well founded. Brévannes deceives you in a most unworthy manner. That can be no longer doubted by you or by me. What shall we do now?"

"You ask me what we shall do now?"

"Exactly, we must make up our minds."

"I have been thinking about it," answered the marchioness with incredible coolness. "I have already had the pleasure of learning how my husband M. le Marquis de Brévannes expresses himself when he is smitten with more powerful charms than mine. I have taken the trouble to follow him to the very midst of his intrigue, and to accompany him as far as the mysterious dwelling where he conceals his happiness from the entire world, and the least I can do after getting as far as that is to give him time to declare and prove his love to the new object of his noble passion."

"What! you want to remain here?"

"Until he comes out, yes, Monsieur de Roquelau, and if you don't feel the courage to do the

same, abandon me, leave me, I will remain here alone!"

"And do you suppose that I should be coward enough? . . ."

The marchioness gave me her hand affectionately.

"I'm a lucky dog," said I, placing her hand to my lips. "You were not saying what you thought, I am quite sure. But, marchioness, let us be sensible."

"I ask no better, provided you don't propose anything impossible."

"That is to say," said I with a smile, "that you promise to think as I do, provided your thoughts don't differ from mine. I accept the condition, and I will do just whatever you please."

"It is very good of you," she murmured.

"Wait . . . don't be in too great a hurry to compliment me, because I have an objection to submit to you."

"Let me hear your objection."

"Marchioness, do you know what time it is?"

"Three hours after midnight, perhaps."

"Do you know where we are?"

"Your coachman just told us, in the Rue Plâtrière, a little way from the Hôtel d'Epéron."

"That is so."

"You see that I am in my right mind."

"Well, now, do you think that it is quite proper that you, the Marchioness de Brévannes, and I, the

Duc de Roquelaure, should find ourselves, at three o'clock in the morning, alone, in the Rue Plâtrière, not far from the Hôtel d'Epéron, standing on the pavement with the wind blowing in our faces?"

"It may not be very proper, as you judiciously pointed out," answered Madame de Brévannes; "but since it must be so, any reflections are useless. I have said that I shall stay . . . I *shall* stay . . ."

"That resolution shows a determined spirit," replied I with a bow, "and I can do nothing but applaud it, for I like courage in whatever form it may present itself and in whatever place, but . . ."

"Another objection!"

"It is of little importance, and is not opposed to your wishes!"

"Out with it then."

"Will it not be possible to arrange matters? I think I know a way. . ."

"If the thing is feasible, I shall not object."

"Really?"

"Really!"

"Let us understand each other. What is your desire? Is it not to keep your post of observation in order to watch that faithless fellow, to know how long the meeting will last, and to be able at last to provoke an explanation, at the end of which, conquered and brought to book by the exactness of your information, he will be obliged to lay down his arms and with shame confess his fault?"

"That's exactly what I want to do."

"You shall be satisfied, marchioness, and far beyond your hopes. . . . I assure you of that."

Hardly had I pronounced the words when I turned towards the house before which we had established our post of observation, and which, consequently, was exactly opposite that into which Brévannes and Madame de Choisy had penetrated ten minutes before.

"Oh!" said my companion, with a sigh, "he is with her now; by this time, even, he may have . . ."

"Very possibly," I answered dryly.

Then I knocked twice, quite gently.

It must be said that I had seen above the doorway a board permitting me to do this. It was a furnished house.

"What are you going to do?" cried Madame de Brévannes.

"Obtain a lodging."

"Do you know anyone in the house, then?"

"All that is not necessary. By means of five or six crowns we shall soon get acquainted."

"And you don't even consult me?"

"Ah! remember, marchioness, you gave me full powers."

"But can I without compromising myself? . . ."

"The risk is just as great in the street."

"That's true . . . but . . ."

" Marchioness, you don't think of another source of annoyance which menaces us."

" What do you mean ? "

" Your husband may see us."

" It is true."

" The countess herself may recognise you. . . ."

" God-a-mercy ! "

" And then you know . . . what railleries ! . . .
What a scandal ! . . ."

" You are right."

" We are both of the same opinion at last."

" Yes . . . but one word more."

" I am all attention."

" From this house shall we see all that we want to see ? "

" We'll ask for a room looking on the street."

" Exactly."

" Unless we get that, we won't do business."

" Oh ! in that way all will be right."

" You see that you can trust me."

During this little dialogue the landlord had had time to put on his breeches and to come and ask through the keyhole in a surly tone :

" Who's there ? "

" A nobleman, who wants hospitality for the night."

" Ah ! but it is very late, you know."

" It is never too late to obtain gratuity, idiot that you are."

And seeing a lozenge-shaped opening cut in the top of the door, I passed my purse through it, and cried to the recalcitrant landlord :

“ Here, pocket that, that's for admittance ; you'll get as much again when I leave ; only do be quick.”

It was an unanswerable argument.

The door opened. The fellow was about sixty, as dry as a mummy, iron-grey hair, hollow-eyed, a pointed protruding chin, while the mouth was already devoid of its most necessary furniture ; he looked like one of those old alchemists whom they used to burn in days gone by in France, as a sort of joke, after having persuaded them that they were sorcerers, a fact which they were quite ready to admit themselves.

“ Can you give us a room in the front of the house ? ”

“ Yes, monseigneur.”

“ On what floor ? ”

“ On the third floor.”

“ Here goes for the third floor. Lead the way, and show us a light.”

A moment after, we had taken possession, Madame de Brévannes and I, of a modest enough room, it is true, but the indispensables were there.

There was a table, a mirror, two armchairs, four chairs . . . and a bed.

Everything was doubtless very simple, but also very sufficient.

We bolted ourselves in, absolutely like two good married people who were travelling, and who were doing their best to enjoy a comfortable night's rest.

The marchioness, who was not used to so much hurry, sat down out of breath, but not forgetting to place herself in front of the window, so as not to lose sight of the house, which was the object of our continual and active watch.

For my part, I lit the candles, and I inspected our little provisional lodging and adjusted my ruffles. All of a sudden Madame de Brévannes gave a little scream.

"What's that?" cried I, as if I had been suddenly awakened by an unexpected noise.

"Nothing . . . oh! nothing . . . but it is all the same now. Heavens! . . . if they were to see us!"

"If that is what you are afraid of, nothing is easier to set your mind at rest; let us put out the candles."

I gave two puffs; we were in darkness.

Then, as Madame de Brévannes said no more, and continued, on the contrary, to stare at the wonderful window, I approached her and repeated my question.

"Do as I am doing," she said . . . "and you will know what I can't tell you . . . look."

It was, in effect, a most curious sight.

If the reader will be good enough to think for a moment or two, he will remember that Brévannes

and the Countess de Choisy were on the second floor of the house opposite; thus, we being on the third floor, could with the greatest ease penetrate the mysteries of their interview.

I could not help smiling.

Madame de Brévannes was not at all in a smiling mood.

I drew my armchair close to hers, and we both of us pressed our foreheads against the window-panes; thus, though at a certain distance, we could distinguish certain diverting details, and nothing was left to the imagination.

The comedy which was being played before our eyes was a sufficiently droll one, though we could not hear what they were saying; it thus became a simple pantomime, whose meaning was so rudely shown that a blind man could not have doubted it.

But I was not blind, nor was Madame de Brévannes.

At the moment when we began to observe them, Madame de Choisy was laughing immoderately, just as if she had been well tickled, and Brévannes was also splitting with laughter. He had got his arm round her waist, and she leant back over the arm of the marquis, while the latter, who seemed particularly quick, profited by the peculiarly provoking position to smother her with kisses.

* * * * *

At this contact, Madame de Choisy sprang up

and tried to escape from the pursuit of her persecutor; she succeeded in disengaging herself from his hands, and ran two or three times round the room.

Brévannes ran after her. . . .

She pretended to trip, and fell into his arms.

Then, lips sought lips, and just what always happens on such occasions, when lips seek each other, they found what they sought. . . .

They had, no doubt, a moment of ecstasy, during which the blood ceased to flow in their veins, and life seemed to leave their hearts.

For they remained immovable, locked in each other's arms, like those groups to which the sculptor's chisel seems to have given life, and which one admires in the palaces of certain Italian princes.

Madame de Brévannes tried to turn away her head, but I easily perceived that superhuman force prevented her taking her eyes from the unexpected spectacle.

She looked once more.

I did as she did.

This amorous assault was not in earnest ; that tasty kiss was the peaceful ending of it. Madame de Choisy leant upon the back of an armchair, as though her strength were at an end, and the Marquis de Brévannes, who, as it seemed, was not a man to lose time, profited by the fatigue of Madame de Choisy.

* * * * *

"Oh ! But it is horrible," murmured Madame de Brévannes.

I was not exactly of the same opinion as the marchioness, but I took good care not to utter a word.

Brévannes continued.

Here Madame de Brévannes had a fainting-fit. I was very much embarrassed. I had neither salts nor aromatic vinegar. I was almost obliged to repeat with her some of the liberties which Brévannes had taken with Madame de Choisy, but with this difference, I did not go quite so far.

But I had to unlace her, to bathe her temples with water, to take off some of her ornaments, which hurt her . . .

I did nothing but my duty ; but I can declare, upon soul and conscience, that never did duty seem more charming or more sweet to perform.

When she came to herself, I could just see in the light of daybreak that she had tears in her eyes.

“ Marchioness, in the name of Heaven, be sensible and do not take to heart things which have been unavoidable, and which we must willy-nilly allow to take their course.”

“ I thank you for your consolations,” answered Madame de Brévannes ; “ but you will understand my grief better if you knew the principles in which I have been brought up, and how thoroughly I believed in the conjugal oath. I believed my husband bound to me as I was bound to him, and he behaved to me in such a way that I was accustomed, ever since we were married, to see in him, not a husband, but a lover.

I was young, innocent, easily deceived. I leave you to imagine the impression that his gallant attentions, his kind cares, the compliments of every kind, which he paid me night and day, had on me."

"You were happy," said I, interrupting her.

"I thought so at first ; to-day I doubt it," answered the marchioness, in a sad tone. "One thing is certain, that is, that Monsieur de Brévannes was a fine figure of a man, the scion of a noble house, and excellent company. Above all things, my pride was flattered. People made a great to-do with him ; he was caressed and fêted . . . the honours of which he was the object gratified my vanity. If all this was not happiness it was very much like it, and I have never since my marriage expressed a regret or offered a complaint. . . . But soon my repose was troubled by vague scandals, which, though but whispered, were loud enough for me to hear. Amorous intrigues, little suppers, gallant rendezvous, to which Monsieur de Brévannes went in secret, were mentioned. I would not believe these things, but the suspicion of them was in my soul. I watched. I fancied that I had discovered some signs, but I never could be quite sure. This evening, at last, having learnt that he was going to Madame de Gouvillè's, and not having been invited by that lady, who, as a matter of fact, did not know me, I introduced myself to her entertainment by means of this mask ; I mingled among the guests ; I have seen . . . that which you know. Now, I ask

myself, have I acted rightly? for uncertainty is doubt, and doubt is at times happiness. I have no longer the resource of doubting. Oh! if you knew how much I suffer in my wifely sentiments, in my tenderness as one who loves, in my pride as a woman! . . . No! you can never understand it . . . it is one of those tortures in which one cannot believe, until one has oneself endured it."

"Marchioness, may I say a word?"

"You have my permission."

"And you will not be angry if I try to destroy your reasonings."

"You can try."

"Well, marchioness, in reality, I do not understand you."

"Explain yourself."

"How," cried I, in the tone of conviction and with the eloquence of a doctor preaching at the Sorbonne—"how, beautiful, young, witty, well-reputed as you are, can you worry yourself about such paltry trifles? A husband, excuse the word! is a piece of furniture, which ought not to take up so much room in a house as you allow to it. Good heavens! You have done as many others have done, and I was wrong to say, as I said just now, that I could not understand you. Young married women are like that. They take everything seriously—the wedding presents, the altar, the priest, the sacramental *yes!* even the husband; and as he plays the lover's *rôle* during the honey-

moon, the poor woman makes it a point of honour to accept the same, and to show a reasonable amount herself; and it happens sometimes that these conscientious efforts cause her to fall in love with her husband. That is perhaps what has happened to you, marchioness. After all, nothing has been lost, except perhaps a little time. Note this, Monsieur de Brévannes has much more to lose than you . . . he possesses in you an adorable wife of twenty, with a heart of gold, and he betrays you . . . for whom? For a Madame de Choisy, a beauty of the time of Mazarin, who could not do without her, and who, they say, had the first-fruits of her love. Do you think he will gain much by the change? You think quite the contrary, and I agree with you absolutely; so much for his share of the business. As for you, marchioness, does your husband's infidelity take away the slightest portion of your importance, the least bit of your beauty? No. Your self-love may be wounded, I can understand that up to a certain point. . . . But your pride? . . . Pooh! Be proud, marchioness, be more than ever proud of those admirable tresses, which drive your rivals to despair; of those two beautiful eyes, whose light, when I saw them for a single moment, so profoundly fascinated me; of those fresh cheeks, which you must not wrinkle by tears; of those lips, whose brightness and purity shame that of coral—in a word, of all those perfections of which you are composed. And if, notwith-

standing the good reasons I have given you, you still feel a little vexation, a trifling grief at the conduct of the marquis, your husband, remember that there remains to you, in order to be quits with him, one means, of which you should have thought before."

"Which, Monsieur de Roquelaure, which?"

"Vengeance!"

"To be avenged! And how?"

The question was a delicate one, and I hardly knew how to answer it. A decided movement in the chamber occupied by Brévannes was now apparent, and it caused her to look in that direction.

I did as she did, and, profiting by her preoccupation, I took her hand.

It is a great thing to be interested!

The hand remained in mine.

For once, our two lovers should have hidden themselves . . . but what am I saying! Why should I lie? Why should I deceive the reader? Far from closing my eyes, I opened them in astonishment, and I think, God forgive me! that Madame de Brévannes did the same.

Only, notwithstanding the dim light, I could see that she was blushing deeply.

The Countess de Choisy was seated on the edge of the bed, and Brévannes was standing in front of her and covering her hair with kisses. Her hair was undone and rolled upon her shoulders like a black

veil, which showed up the extraordinary whiteness of her skin. She seemed to find a great charm in this position, and gave herself up more and more to her lover's caresses.

* * * * *

What passed then between the Marchioness de Brévannes and I? By what terms can I explain the sudden trouble which took possession of our souls? All the remembrances of what I had seen roused in me humiliation and anger; and the same effect was produced on the marchioness—our minds were identically affected.

We drew our chairs together, our bodies touched, in our persons the same accord was established as was already in our minds . . . and, without wishing it, without thinking of it, without any premeditation, in consequence, she found an affinity in me.

In this delicate situation, what ought I to do?

Two courses were open to me.

I could, taking into account my age, for I was no longer young, take pity on the poor woman and offer her all those consolations which the first-comer has always at his disposition in such a case. I could show myself reasonable, sententious, moral and paternal. Nothing forbade me to praise resignation, that admirable virtue, which is so particularly irritating when we are compelled to practise it. This was a *rôle* which had a certain charm, and on which my confessor would doubtless have complimented me.

On the other hand, I could have one of those returns of youth which causes the fire which is smouldering to blaze up in the cold brain and in the frozen heart. My memory was not so short but that it presented to me, at times, the picture of my old exploits. At that idea, would not my old valour naturally arise, and leap and run after new conquests? An expert in the art of love, was it not excusable enough in me to try my power a last time, and to prove that in the heat of the fray the experience of the old general is well worth a soldier's frantic rush?

Right or wrong, I chose the latter plan.

"What are you doing?" murmured Madame de Brévannes.

"I am answering the question you asked me a moment ago."

"What question?"

"You don't remember it?"

"No."

"That's strange!"

"What did I ask you then?"

"How a woman could revenge herself."

"Ah! yes . . . I remember now. . . . And you didn't answer me."

"For the very simple reason that your husband disturbed us."

"And now?"

"Now . . . of what use are words? . . . Don't

you think, marchioness, that the man who has played you this trick deserves exemplary chastisement ? ”

“ Oh, yes ! . . . ”

“ A terrible one . . . ”

“ Doubtless.”

“ An immediate one.”

“ Oh, Heaven ! I fear that I understand you.”

“ Don’t be afraid, do not tremble so, dear marchioness ; your fear might be explained if you were in the power of one of those insolent swaggerers who profit by a chance, like a thief in search of plunder, and whose greatest happiness is to brag of a conquest which has flattered their vanity . . . ”

In saying this, I assuredly calumniated youth in general, but I had to take every precaution in order to succeed in my suit. I continued :

“ You could also be disquieted if I had been a frequenter of your house, so that the attention of slanderers might be fixed on you. . . . But no ! I have never been seen at your house, nobody in the world knows that we are here, a profound mystery surrounds us, and besides . . . besides . . . you wish to revenge yourself.”

“ It is true ! ”

“ Very well ! When one revenges oneself one does not stop to think.”

Madame de Brévannes was still looking through the window ; Brévannes and the Choisy woman were still together. There was something in their attitude

which was excessively cool and careless, that a glance sufficed to make assurance doubly sure on a subject which can be easily guessed.

What more need be said? The drunkenness of love and the drunkenness of vexation got into our heads at the same time, and I only met with one of those gentle resistings which are, to tell the truth, but the usual preliminaries of defeat. Our happiness lasted ten minutes.

During those ten minutes I felt twenty years younger.

My heart had once more found its energy, my joints seemed suppler than ever, my blood was warmer, my head was lighter, my ideas were more lucid.

I, Roquelaure, I—well-nigh fifty—I had possessed a woman who, for beauty, excelled any of those I had known before, and who was assuredly far more virtuous.

She had forgotten herself in a moment of delirium, and it was I—unworthy that I was—who had profited by that moment of forgetfulness.

After all, nobody had any right to grumble.

She was avenged and I was happy.

After the true and sincere narrative which I have given here, other details about the rest of this strange night would doubtless be wearying to the reader.

It will suffice for him to know that Madame de Brévannes got home before her husband, and that

after having set her down at the door of her house, I went on to my own at full gallop, anxious as I was to get to bed, and there dream at ease of what had happened to me.

The next day I called upon the Marchioness de Brévannes, who received me with a grace that was perfect.

I begged two favours of her—permission to see her frequently and the title of friend.

She was pleased with my modesty, and refused me nothing. . . .

As for Brévannes, he never doubted that his *bonne fortune* had had invisible witnesses, and that the witnesses were none other than the marchioness and I.

He pursued his life of intrigues and pleasures continuously.

His wife, whom I am far from blaming, profited by my lessons, and no longer amused herself with the folly of jealousy.

When de Brévannes took a new mistress, she took a new lover.

It is what she called retaliation.

CHAPTER LXIII

Don Alvar de Quesada—An observant traveller—The Queen of Portugal—A husband accused of impotence—Where are the Portuguese ministers going to put their noses?—A broken marriage, another marriage concluded, and a hanging thrown in—A message from Louis XIV.—The Comedy—*Les Femmes Savantes* and *Les Précieuses Ridicules*—Reflections of Don Alvar de Quesada on French gallantry—Samples drawn from the character of each nation—Molière and the Abbé Cotin—M. de Vauvert—His jokes—Somebody rings—Bertaut opens the door—Madame Turcan—M. Turcan—A droll couple—A marital quarrel—Big words—A scene of jealousy—The Chevalier de Canillac—The denials of Madame Turcan—An original experience—The whipped one—Result of the ordeal—Madame Turcan is convicted of lying—What I saw in a dream—A visit to Louis XIV.—I am made Governor of the Province of Guyenne.

I RECEIVED a visitor one day the announcement of whom gave me great pleasure. It was a certain Don Alvar de Quesada, a Galician by birth, whom I had known when on my journey to Madrid, and who had promised, after a stay which he was compelled to make in Lisbon, that he would come to see me in Paris.

This charming man, naturally a very gentle person, the friend of pleasure and tranquillity, was above

all things a great philosopher, and liked to observe the manners of the time. It pleased him to judge men, and he kept an exact register of everything original and interesting that passed in the different courts of Europe.

It will be seen from this that he had his hands full, and I have always regretted that after a duel which he had in 1676, and in which he was run right through the body by his adversary, that his lodgings were not searched and his manuscripts taken possession of and published.

"Don Alvar!" I cried, when they told me the name of the person who sought me; "quick, quick! Ask him in."

We embraced cordially, and I begged him to dine with me.

He accepted without the slightest difficulty, and I found him a most delightful guest.

"You seem satisfied," I said to him at dessert; "your stay at Lisbon was a pleasant one, I suppose."

"I couldn't have been there at a better time," he replied. "You know that I like strange histories and events which are rather out of common. The Queen of Portugal, when I arrived, delighted me with an explosion of the loveliest scandal you can possibly imagine. I took notes; it will be, I swear to you, one of the most curious chapters of my Secret Memoirs."

“What happened?”

“Listen to details. The queen is, as you know, married to Dom Alphonso, the degenerate son of the glorious Dom Juan de Braganza. This Dom Alphonso has a brother named Pedro, whose amiable perfections consist of having an enormous pair of shoulders and the chest of a bull. The queen, probably tired of her husband and attracted by the appetising qualities of her brother-in-law, conceived a violent passion for the latter, and resolved to satisfy it . . . at any price.”

“Queens consider that they can do anything,” I remarked with a smile. “She made him her lover?”

“That was not enough for her, she wished to make him her husband.”

“But Dom Alphonso?”

“She no longer cared for him!”

“But bigamy!”

“This is how things were arranged. The queen called together all the members of her council, and then, in all the pomp of her royal majesty, she declared to them her intention of soliciting from the Court of Rome a bull for the annulling of her marriage, seeing that her husband . . .”

“Well?”

“Was . . .”

“Was . . . what?”

“Impotent.”

I burst into a roar of laughter. Don Alvar de Quesada did the same.

"It was a good reason."

"Excellent!" said Don Alvar. "It is, in fact, the only one which was impossible to answer. Nevertheless, one of the members of the council—and this is the funny part of the affair—begged respectfully to observe to the queen that it was hardly sufficient to declare the impotence of a man, but that it was necessary to prove it. And as the queen objected to a remark which seemed to be suspicious of her good faith, the indiscreet member took the liberty of saying that one saw sometimes a very handsome child walking about the streets of Lisbon who was said to be the result of the amours of the king with a well-known courtesan; that, if that was the fact, it would be found very difficult to persuade the Pope that His Majesty the King was incapable of the work of the flesh."

"That was cool!" I cried.

"It was so cool," answered Don Alvar, "that eight days afterwards the papal bull decreeing the suppression of the marriage was signed, and the author of the objection was hanged."

"What! only for that?"

"No! . . . on some pretext or other they told the mob that he was a sorcerer."

"It was after this event," continued Don Alvar de Quesada, "that I left Lisbon; being a lover of good

stories, I can never hope for a better one than this. I had seen the authors of it, I had appreciated its effect on the public mind, and I shall never forget that little story. Now I am off to Holland."

"Where you wish to see the war which they are preparing for?"

"What! A war!"

"Doubtless . . . Louis XIV. is going to lead his armies thither."

"Then I shall go elsewhere," said Don Alvar. "I wield a pen, and not a musket. I wish you would point out some country where I can give free reign to my tastes and instincts."

"Do you wish to see," said I to him, "a nation which knows how to sleep and how to fight, in which every possible sentiment is found, where they dance in spite of cannonading—where, in a word, life is never interrupted, and presents many phases of the most powerful, the most solid, the most varied organisation, to the intelligent observer? In that case remain in France."

"I would stay a long time," replied Don Alvar, in a frankly friendly tone, "were it only for the pleasure of hob-nobbing with so charming a nobleman as you are."

The meal was finished in an effusion of cordial gaiety, and we were rising from table, when they brought me a document bearing the royal seal.

I broke open the envelope and read the message.

I was directed to be present early on the following morning at the *petit lever* of King Louis XIV.

That evening we went, Don Alvar de Quesada and I, to the play. They were performing *Les Femmes Savantes* and *Les Précieuses Ridicules*, by Poquelin de Molière.

My Spaniard, besides the qualities which I was pleased to recognise in him just now, was, in addition, a lettered and well-educated man.

He understood and thoroughly appreciated the French language, also he listened with perfect understanding to the above-named works. He laughed heartily at the comic passages, and even appeared to take a lively interest in studying the faces of the audience. As he had not made, during the whole representation, any remark either on the plays or their acting, I asked him, as we returned, what he thought of them.

"I admire more than anybody the genius of your comic poet, and I avow that, with the exception of our illustrious Don Pedro Calderon de la Barca, who was the first to write a piece on the same subject as the *Femmes Savantes*, entitled *On ne badine pas avec l'amour*, that I know of no one, I was going to say in Spain, but I will say in Europe, whose greatness can bear any comparison with his; but I am astonished that in France, where you are so gallant, pleasant jokes directed against women can have such great success."

.....

"Your surprise," I said to him, "explains itself by the nature of the Spanish character. Serious and meditative, the child of Spain takes everything seriously, and cannot laugh at things which he is accustomed to cherish and respect. With us it is altogether different. We like to see the face beneath the mask ; under seeming perfection we always look for the ridiculous. We adore woman, which does not prevent us from here and there telling her little truths about herself."

"From this moment, if you like it," said Don Alvar, "there is nothing to be said; but do you know that in the *Précieuses Ridicules* the provinces are rather severely treated."

"The provinces will console themselves in trying to correct their faults," said I gaily. "And besides, do not be deceived, my dear Alvar ; in France there is a great deal of joking ; the most ridiculous and fatuous people have good moments in their lives when they see their own folly, and they are quite contented to be criticised. It is this supreme good sense of everybody which causes our author's success."

"In Spain," said Don Alvar de Quesada, "we are very curious about all that is done and said in France. We have read some very lively and spiteful attacks upon Molière, signed by a certain Abbé Cotin."

"What sort of a man is this Abbé Cotin, and why is he so very angry with Molière ?"

"He is angry with Molière because he tried to

ruin him with his protectors, because, as a rule, people generally detest those whom they have tried to injure. After the representation of the *Misanthrope*, he insinuated to the Duc de Montausier that it was he whom Molière wished to represent."

"I do not see," said Don Alvar, "that there would have been any harm if he had. The *Misanthrope* is a noble personage of lofty sentiments, to whom anyone would be proud to be compared."

"That was exactly the duke's answer, my dear Alvar, and it is that, perhaps more than all the other attacks upon Molière, which has ruined Cotin in the opinion of all, and exposed him to the satire of men of wit. The scene which you have just witnessed in the *Femmes Savantes*, which takes off *Ménage* and Cotin under the names of Vadius and Trissotin has done the rest. Cotin is not yet dead, but he is well and carefully shrouded."

"Talking about the theatre, I well remember, one fine evening, when I took a certain Monsieur de Vauvert to the performance at the Marais; he was the most stupid fool in France and Navarre, and the most pretentious as well.

"It was this Monsieur de Vauvert who once, in a discussion at the President Escalopier's house on the nature of the earth and the movement of the sun, was alone in his opinion, and declined to be convinced. He insisted, and would not budge an inch from it, that the sun did not go round the earth.

“ ‘But,’ objected a joker, ‘how is it that, having arrived at the west, where it sets, one sees it rise in the east, if it doesn’t pass underneath the earth?’ ”

“ ‘Parbleu,’ answered M. de Vauvert, ‘that’s the artfulness of it! It comes back the same way, and the reason you don’t see it is that it travels at night.’ ”

“To return to my story about the play. I had, as I said, taken him to the Marais. They were playing *Andromaque* and *Les Plaideurs*.

“Monsieur de Vauvert listened to the whole performance with the greatest imperturbability.

“But when we came out and I asked him how he liked his evening, he said :

“ ‘This Monsieur Racine is a very superior genius, and it must be also confessed a very original one. For my part, I look upon this piece *Andromaque* as very pretty, particularly on account of the ending, which was much more cheerful than I could have hoped. In fact, at first I was ready to weep, but the sight of the little dogs made me laugh.’ ”

I left Don Alvar de Quesada about midnight and returned to my house, much puzzled as to what the king could want with me.

I was just going to bed when someone rang violently at the door. My *valet-de-chambre* Bertaut asked me if he should go and see who it was.

“*Dame!*” said I. . . . “as they are ringing you had better go.”

“It is very late.”

"Oh! go and open the door."

Bertaut obeyed, and a woman appeared, her dress in disorder, her hair dishevelled and in a terrible plight.

She raised her veil; I recognised Madame Turcan.

Madame Turcan, whom I do not think I have yet mentioned in these memoirs, was a most distinguished original; she had an agreeable enough face and manners, besides which she was very well-made; her father had been an intendant of the late M. de Guise. I had met her on several occasions at the President Escalopier's, at Madame de Lesdigières', and at the entertainments of Madame de Cornuel.

"Good God!" I cried on recognising her, "whence this trouble and this excitement, dear lady?"

"Save me!" she answered, "save me!"

"Save you . . . and from what?"

"From the pursuit of my husband."

"Where is he?"

"Behind me, perhaps."

"What ho! Bertaut! shut the door."

But I had hardly time to give the order, when a frightful commotion began in my antechamber.

I heard two voices which performed a sort of horrible duet.

The first one was sharp and quick . . . it was that of my *valet-de-chambre*.

The second was sonorous and bellowing, like a church clock.

It was that of the amiable Monsieur Turcan.

As I said two words about Madame Turcan, it is only right I should say as much about her spouse. He was a melancholy fellow, a Master of Requests and Councillor, well known for being a triply-distilled ass. Physically he was a giant, but his great stature had not helped him with the fair sex, for he enjoyed as regards them such a melancholy reputation, and somebody, for a joke, had made couplets on him in which he was advised to apply for a situation as eunuch at the court of the Grand Turk. This did not prevent him from making great pretensions of being a free-liver and even a favourite with the sex. He believed himself to be a very handsome fellow. The women, however, were not of his opinion.

Monsieur Turcan got the better of Bertaut, whom he flung aside, and then rushed with the impetuosity of a torrent into the room where was his weeping better-half, and where I, too, was sitting.

Madame Turcan had buried her face in the corner of the sofa, trying to hide her blushes with a red damask cushion, which she used as a rampart or shield.

"If I had not the honour of knowing you, sir," said I to M. Turcan, "I should ask you by what right you come into my house without authority, and in case your answer did not appear perfectly satisfactory, I should have you thrown out of the window without ceremony. But I know who you are, and I

have also heard that sometimes you are a little weak, you know. I forgive you then for the scandal, which I am content to attribute to the violence of your character and to an attack of fever, perhaps beyond your own control. However, I await your explanations."

"Sir," answered Turcan, drawing himself up, "I find it very bold of you . . ."

"Oh! I beg your pardon . . ." I quickly interrupted, "that is the tone which persons who have to be thrown out of the window use . . . perhaps you would like to try that amusement?"

And at the same time I seized him vigorously by the arm.

"Monsieur de Roquelaure," replied Turcan, in a much more quiet voice, "excuse me. . . . When this conceited little beast is in my sight I cannot contain myself."

It was his wife whom he thus apostrophised.

"What have you to reproach her with?" I asked him most seriously.

"What have I to reproach her with!"

"Yes."

"I have to reproach her with planting on my head certain ornaments which were not on that of my father."

"Before accusing his wife of so grave a thing as that," said I, "a man ought to be very sure of his facts."

"And I am very sure of my facts," answered the fellow, firmly.

"What proof have you?" burst in Madame Turcan.

"What proof!"

Turcan shrugged his shoulders, and turned to me.

"Fancy, Monsieur de Roquelaure, I had just returned from Châtellerault, where I have some land, and being about fifty paces from my house, I see Madame get into a carriage. There jumps in after her a popinjay called, I believe, Chevalier de Canillac, a sort of whipper-snapper who has never drawn a sword in his life, and of whom I should make but a single mouthful if I had but the good-luck to catch him."

"You are making a mistake," murmured Madame Turcan.

"What's that?"

"You saw nobody get in behind me."

"Well, I never!"

"Neither the Chevalier de Canillac nor anybody else."

"That's *too* strong!"

"*Dame!* you hear what she declares," said I to Turcan.

"And if she declared it a hundred times more, what would that matter to me, since I *saw* him!"

"You thought you saw," said Madame Turcan.

"I thought I saw! Very good, so be it! . . .

Let us say that I am short-sighted . . . You still owe me an explanation . . . Why were you going out such a time of night?"

"To get some fresh air."

"You felt very warm, then?"

"I had the vapours."

"Can you tell me why, the faster I ran, the faster went your coach?"

"Coachmen have their fancies; this one whipped his horses, and the horses went fast."

"You have always an answer ready."

"That's a proof of my submissiveness."

"Can you put your hand on your heart and say that you meant going to Monsieur de Roquelaure's house?"

"Put my hand on my heart, no! But when I put my head out of the window of the coach I saw that I was followed, I was seized with fear, I lost my head, and seeing this house, where I hoped to find a refuge, I made the man stop."

"And you did not recognise me?"

"No!"

"Monsieur de Roquelaure," said Turcan to his wife, "has just heard the remarks you have thought proper to invent to fit the position, which, I admit, is so bad that it is natural you should try to get out of it. It is my turn to speak, and I declare, beforehand, that what I am going to say is the simple truth."

"Go on, monsieur," said Madame Turcan.

"You left home because you did not think that I should come back this evening from Châtellerault."

Madame Turcan made an impatient gesture.

"You left your house to go to that of M. le Chevalier de Canillac, and you did that with the deliberate intention of sleeping with him."

"Oh!" cried Madame Turcan, with suppressed indignation.

"It seems to me," I interrupted, "that in my presence it is not quite the thing . . ."

"Pardon me," said Turcan, "I want to speak before a witness, and I would rather it were you than another. To continue, then . . ."

Madame Turcan raised her eyes to heaven with a resigned air.

"You said, madame," said the obstinate husband, "that you had lost your head; that is the only point where you did not lie. When you recognised me—for you did recognise me perfectly—you didn't know what to do. Thinking to trick me, you came in here, leaving the Chevalier alone in the coach, and hoping to find a hiding-place whence I should find it impossible to snatch you. I did not have so very much trouble. Being still very active, as you see, I rushed up the stairs as quickly as you did. . . . I came in; I saw you . . . as I see you at this minute, trembling, confounded, and forced, by your silence, to confess everything."

"I confess nothing," dryly replied the offended woman.

"But," said Turcan, who was nearly weeping, "a confession sometimes disarms the severest judge."

"You are not my judge."

"What is a husband, then?"

"A fool, when he is like you."

At this speech, which was too true to fail to wound, Turcan made a hideous grimace, and recommenced:

"In fact, if you are innocent, I should be wrong to show myself relentless, or to crush you with a motiveless anger. Considering everything, I should prefer, in order to test your truth, to have recourse to another means."

"What is the other means," said I to Turcan; "and if it suits madame . . ."

"Oh! it is not absolutely indispensable that it should suit her, for it entirely depends upon me to use it or not."

I bowed like a man who is forced to submit to the wishes of another.

"Madame," he said, in a tender tone.

"Monsieur Turcan," she answered, in well-nigh the same tone.

"Do you remember our wedding-day?"

"*Dame* . . . slightly."

"Do you remember it enough to, after well searching your memory, recall the words which you were good enough to address to me on our wedding-night, between five and six in the morning?"

"If you remind me, it is very likely."

"Well, my dearest woman, as I still possess the same defect of which you are this moment the victim, as I was jealous about the future exactly in the same way as I am jealous to-day about the present, I explained to you the horror I felt at the very idea of ever thinking you unfaithful. To which you replied, wrapping yourself in your virtue, then without a stain, I am pleased to think: 'Sir husband, if it should ever happen that a man, whoever he might be, could boast of having seen . . . were it but my knee, I should instantly die of shame and despair. . . .'"

"It is quite true," replied Madame Turcan; "they were my actual words. I am flattered you should have remembered them so well."

"I am charmed," answered Turcan, "that you confirm that pretty souvenir, and if you please, madame, we are going to see if you told the truth."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Be kind enough to get up."

"What are you going to do?"

"Good heavens! are you afraid of me?"

"No . . . but yet . . . I want to know . . ."

"Oh! that's not necessary."

"But, excuse me . . . what are you going to do?"

"You can see for yourself. I take you round the waist."

"Heaven!"

This exclamation was drawn from Madame Turcan by a very sudden movement to which she was sub-

mitted when she least expected it. Turned over and placed horizontally on her husband's left arm, in such a way that her head and her arms floated in space behind Turcan, she felt herself caught as if in an iron ring, which prevented her turning round or struggling, however much she might want to do so.

The poor woman did not know to what she was about to be subjected, and I knew no more than she did.

All of a sudden, M. Turcan, using his right hand very quickly, lifted up madame's dress, petticoats and chemise, so thoroughly, that without having done anything to deserve so great a favour, and with a sudden surprise, I was obliged to behold the most beautiful fall of the back that perhaps I have ever admired in my life, two marvellously-shaped legs—in a word, all which formed the antipodes to the face of Madame Turcan. The light was so well placed that I lost nothing of this charming display. . . .

* * * * *

Wretch that he was, Monsieur Turcan, instead of a tender caress, gave two or three tremendous smacks to his wife's behind, and then stood her up again upon her feet.

The poor unfortunate woman was as red as a peony.

"By Heaven, madame," cried Turcan, "you see that you are a . . . liar, because here is this gentleman, who has seen a good deal more than your knee,

and as yet, I must confess, you don't seem to be dying of shame or despair."

"I always thought you were a fool . . . and now you seem to be half-mad," said Madame Turcan.

And, passing majestically before her husband, she went towards the door, curtsied gravely to me, and left the room. Turcan ran after her and joined her upon the staircase.

He had forgotten to bid me good-bye.

At the end of some seconds I heard the coach move away. Turcan had seated himself by the side of his wife in the place which was occupied half-an-hour before by the Chevalier de Canillac.

Sometime after this adventure, I heard that the pair had finally quarrelled, Madame Turcan having left her husband to join her lover.

Frankly, I cannot blame her for abandoning her dullard of a husband. There was no possibility of living with a madman like that, who, in addition, had a very bad reputation among women. This peculiarity reminded me of a sort of resemblance which existed between Madame Turcan and the Queen of Portugal, of whom I was speaking just now. The figure of Madame Turcan pursued me all night in my dreams. I saw her again and again in the position in which her husband had exhibited her to me, perhaps even less clothed . . . which made me pass an hour or two of very agreeable slumbers.

The next day I took care not to miss attending, according to the royal command.

Many persons of distinction, like myself, awaited His Majesty's good pleasure. We talked about the subjects of the day, and particularly of the siege of Candia, which the Turks had been blockading for about two years.

M. de Châtillon was justly astonished at the carelessness and want of sympathy of the Christians.

Assuredly times and men were much changed, and that day was very far distant when, on account of a papal bull and the preaching of a single monk, the whole of Europe rose, as one man, to rush to the defence of the Cross and pursue that immense and glorious enterprise, the extermination of the infidels. Judæa was then the goal of the most noble and most glorious efforts.

Now things had an altogether different appearance.

Candia, considered as the last bulwark of Christianity, was only defended by a few Maltese galleys and a handful of papal soldiers. The King of France had in vain given the signal to the other princes of Europe for an expedition in favour of Candia. He had sent seven thousand men, commanded by the Duc de Beaufort; but his generosity had been well-nigh without result, because this example, whether from indifference or want of resources, had not been followed by the rest of the European nations.

I drew M. de Châtillon's attention to the fact that after all more than one great deed, worthy of the high and antique renown of the French nobility, could be recounted ; M. de la Feuillade, a simple country gentleman, had just taken a resolution for which it was difficult to find the parallel in the noblest times of chivalry. Possessor of a modest enough patrimony, he sold a large portion of his property in order to equip, at his own expense, three hundred cavaliers, whom he led in person to Candia. Unfortunately, as everyone knew, his devotion had been but badly recompensed, for almost immediately after the death of the Duc de Beaufort, who had been killed in a sortie, the Grand Vizier commanding the Turkish troops had entered the town, where he found nothing but universal desolation, and a heap of smoking ruins.

These events had had very little effect on the mind of the King of France.

Louis XIV., at that time, only thought of his gigantic scheme of conquering the whole of the Low Countries, commencing at Holland. . . .

Each day this project made great progress in the monarch's brain and on paper ; theoretically it was carried out by the skilful tacticians by whom he was always surrounded.

This enterprise had been the universal subject of conversation for several days. We were chatting about it with M. de Châtillon, when it was announced that the gentlemen attending the *petit lever* were about to be introduced.

The king was radiant.

He waved a gracious salute with his hand to all who had just entered, and conversed privately, in a whisper at first, with M. de Châtillon, De Turenne and De Louvois. At length he made a sign to me to approach.

"Duc de Roquelaure," said he, "it is shortly my intention to make a journey of parade in my new conquests in the neighbourhood of Dunkerque and Lille. It is even possible that I may quit France for a short period."

There was a murmur of regret among the courtiers.

"But," continued the king, "when one leaves home, it is necessary, above all things, that the fireside be well guarded. I wish to distribute, over the whole length and breadth of my kingdom, certain of my devoted and most faithful subjects, to whom I can intrust, without inquietude, the sacred depository of my power and my honour. Duc de Roquelaure, you are among those whom I look upon as entirely devoted to me. I name you Governor of Guyenne. You will leave in three days."

And then His Majesty gave me his hand to kiss.

I did not wait for so flattering an order to be repeated. For the favour which had been accorded me had been the object of my wishes for more than a year. I felt that the king had been indeed generous.

M. de Saint-Simon, who arrived at the very moment when I kissed the hand of Louis XIV.,

made a little grimace by which he showed his annoyance.

I pretended not to see him, so as not to be obliged to salute him ; the manœuvre was perfectly successful.

That poor nobleman doubtless had an attack of fever, but I had other things to do than to pity him.

I hastened, on quitting the apartments of the king, to put my affairs in order, and prepare everything for my departure.

This time I was leaving Paris no longer to rush about in search of adventures, but, on the contrary, in the hope of finding the repose of which I felt I had need.

Three times twenty-four hours had passed away, when, according to the king's instructions, a post-chaise passed through the barriers of the capital, and clattered along the road towards Bordeaux.

That postchaise, dear reader, carried the good Duc de Roquelaure, to whom perhaps you have grown accustomed, and who was going to bury—is it to be believed! in the depths of an obscure province in a tranquil governorship his happy character, his still youthful sprightliness, his indulgent philosophy, his ever frank laugh, and even the remembrance of his joyous amours.

CHAPTER LXIV

Roquelaure as a greybeard! . . .—The Bordeaux road—No inn!—An officious countryman—A singular resting-place for the night—The convent of Sainte-Marguerite-de-la-Croix—The Lady Superior—A fainting-fit—I instal myself—The malignant influence of a convent of nuns—I cannot close my eyes—A movement of curiosity—The dormitory—I do not see what I had hoped for—The corridor—The Apparition—It is a woman—A mysterious visit—A dialogue in which I alone speak—My *Apparition* is silent—Another conversation—The open window—A draught—The awakening—A little quarrel—I am by turns cursed and pardoned—My departure—My old valet Bruscambille—Delicate attention of that thorough-paced rascal—I leave at length!—Reflections on the journey.

BEHOLD me, then, started for the province of Guyenne, a beautiful province without a doubt, all the more beautiful to me because it was the birthplace of my race; but a sojourning place which would have appeared dull to me, I frankly confess, had I been but twenty years of age.

But I was a greybeard. . . .

A greybeard!!!

Horrid word! . . . And yet I laugh at it myself—greybeard! But it is not everybody who gets as far as that. *Non licet omnibus adire Corinthum!*

To continue, if it was, on the one hand, disagreeable, yet on the other I looked on it as a matter of consolation. Youth and beauty would not be nearly so necessary to me in Guyenne as at Versailles or Paris. My rank, my titles, my dignity as Governor for His Majesty King Louis XIV. would give me considerable consolation, and I was sure to gain in honours and consideration what I was threatened with losing in naughty looks, attractive coquetries, and gallant rendezvous. I have, as everybody knows, the tastes of a nobleman. I meant to travel as did the Cardinal Richelieu. I had an excellent litter made, beautifully hung, which did not shake, and which was filled with pillows on which I could recline and find myself as comfortable as though I were lying in my bed.

I took a large staff of servants, which I renewed thoroughly; my last *valet-de-chambre*, whom I had much liked, had died six weeks before of a suppressed sweating, as he came out of an inn.

It was a long time since I had been at Bordeaux, and I hoped once more to meet certain good friends there who would help me to pass my last days in gaiety.

So I left thoroughly resigned; I had made the best use of my youth, and I could not say I had lost my time. When I got into my chaise I bade a sincere adieu to my past. I felt myself already detached from things in this world, and really only

desired to secure for myself in my retreat a tranquil position, free from human worries.

But, in truth, my life had continually been a sort of sleep, in which I dreamt the most delightful dreams; and I must confess that when I slept the devil rocked my cradle.

I had the best intentions in the world, I had the most virtuous intentions, but his malicious breath was mingled with my excellent inspirations, and put them to flight.

In spite of myself, in spite of my firmest resolutions, I always end it by sinning.

This time—and probably to serve as a crown to all the others—I had an adventure which I neither hoped for nor desired, nor sought.

It was about half-way on my journey.

My postillion, thoroughly knocked up, arrived in a small village, the name of which I cannot remember, and which was inhabited by well-to-do farmers, each of whom had a little house and an orchard.

There was but one decent inn. One might have fancied oneself in Spain, where one is permitted to travel, but not to rest or sleep.

We had just got through a stage of seven leagues, and our horses were knocked up. In order to get away immediately, fresh horses would have been necessary, and after half-an-hour's enquiries, I made sure that I should have to wait till daybreak.

Where was I to go?

Where was I to put up for the night ?

One good fellow, the man whose house I had first seen, seeing my embarrassment, and having seen me in the middle of the road, not knowing what to do with myself, sincerely pitied me, though he did not know who I was. He regretted that he could not have the honour of putting me up himself, seeing that his house was too small, but he promised to procure me a good resting-place for the night if I would take the trouble to follow him to a place where he assured me that I would be well received.

It was a very acceptable proposition.

I jumped at it.

Then I followed my conductor. He seemed to me to be a good sort of fellow, dressed as are our farmers, lucky people who live outside the world of intrigues, of ambitions, and of all the bad passions. I asked him whither he was conducting me.

He contented himself with a smile and said :

"Make your mind easy, sir. I have given you my word, you will not regret it. The hospitality for the night which I want to procure for you is, it cannot be gainsaid, one of the most agreeable you can imagine."

It was getting dark rapidly ; it was about half-past eight.

"Sir," said my peasant, "here we are."

We had arrived at the extremity of a shady avenue of chestnut-trees, and through the leaves which

trembled in the wind I perceived little lights which sparkled here and there, like stars in the sky or like the luminosity of the sea. The entrance was arched, niches carved in stone ornamented both sides of the doorway, above which I saw a cross.

On looking at the door itself, which was a double one, and was made of the finest and most solid oak, I saw a wicket, the holes of which were very small, and which was closed from within.

The walls also were fairly high, and above them I saw the summit of a slender and graceful belfry rise towards heaven. It was evidently that of a chapel which formed part of a larger building, which it was as yet impossible to see.

"What is this place?" I asked my guide.

"Does it not seem fit and proper, sir?"

"But first, I must know . . ."

"Oh, you are a nobleman of good blood," answered the peasant with a cunning smile, "and you are certain to be well received everywhere. Besides, you must recognise at a glance this calm and peaceful retreat."

"It seems to me like a convent."

"You have said the word."

"What! my good man, you have brought me to a convent?"

"And why not?"

"I am very far from complaining. It is sometimes good to be under God's guardianship, and pious

persons are always good and excellent company. And now I should be glad to know with whom I have to deal. Who are the monks who inhabit this holy place ? ”

“ They are not monks,” said the villager in a tone of mystery.

“ Who are they, then ? ”

“ They are nuns ! ”

At the word my heart began to beat and my knees to tremble. And why ? What could this fact have to do with me ; considering my age it could not matter much, but the thing seemed original enough. . . . You may believe me or not, as you please, but I am certain that my heart began to beat, just as it used to beat in the first years of my youth. Nuns ! so pretty, so innocent, so sentimental ! Under that black dress of monastic simplicity, of slightly coarse stuff, a good figure becomes so nice, and a white skin does show up so well !

I gave way to these wicked thoughts for several minutes.

My guide recalled me to myself by saying in a low tone :

“ Does monsieur desire to go at once to the Superior of the convent ? She alone can give a traveller the necessary permission to pass the night in the interior of the building, which I may tell you is one of the best kept and most austere in the whole province.”

“ Let us go to the Superior.”

A lay sister came at the sound of a bell, which my conductor espied under the vestibule, and which he pulled as a man who is used to the customs of the place. He explained to her what I wanted, and the lay sister, after having made a deliberate and respectful reverence, retired to inform her mistress of the object of my desire.

In order to more conveniently await the return of our messenger, we entered a vast square parlour, furnished with a few common chairs and some very ordinary pictures, which all represented, as was fitting from the nature of the place, solemn subjects connected with religion.

The lay sister soon returned.

My first remark on seeing her was this :

“ By-the-way, sister, I forgot, before letting you leave to inform the Lady Superior, to tell you the most important thing.”

“ What was that ? ”

“ My name.”

“ Your name, sir, is absolutely immaterial to us. The convent of the Sisters of Sainte-Marguerite-de-la-Croix is, above all things, a convent of shelter, and when anyone has need of us, be he great or be he small, commoner or nobleman, he is quite certain of being well received.”

I thanked the sister as well as I could for her honest speech ; and I asked her what I should do next.

"Be good enough to follow me," said the lay sister; "our Mother Superior desires to receive you herself."

Then, with a significant look, she made my guide understand that he could take himself off, since I was now upon hospitable ground and had no further need of his services.

He went away, saluting me most respectfully, and without saying a single word.

But, when I turned towards him to thank him, he suddenly whispered in my ear the following words, which left me, I confess, overwhelmed with astonishment:

"I knew what I was about in bringing you here, Monsieur de Roquelaure. Good luck and good-bye!"

Now, how did the fellow know my name? Where could I hide without being recognised? Is it absolutely forbidden me to retain my *incognito*.

I was so puzzled that I was about to tell my officious introducer to go to the devil. The animal! . . . What sort of joke was this? Why this mysterious air? What good luck did he wish me? At my age, although I was not exactly broken down, what hope could I nourish in the midst of a troop composed of young and innocent nuns, whom duty called upon me in the most imperative manner to respect? To bring me to the convent, and then to imagine he had done a master-stroke! What did he mean?

In truth, there was a great deal to brag about !

And, after all, how was it that this original clod-hopper knew me ?

Where had he seen me ? Where had he known me ? Why had he not told me his name ?

Was it my servants who had told him who I was ? Assuredly not ! The said servants had gone, by order, into the sty of an inn which was at the entrance of the village ; he had not had time to communicate with them.

Therefore, he knew me.

After all, what did it matter ? I thought no more about it ; I had other fish to fry.

While these thoughts were passing through my mind, I entered the apartment of the Lady Superior of the convent of Sainte-Marguerite-de-la-Croix.

She was a woman of cold and austere visage ; her forehead was symmetrically framed in those white bands which are the symbol of the female priest ; her face was pale and looked as though cut in marble.

Her eye, severe and calm, was yet remarkable for an expression of sweetness, which was, as it were, revealed in spite of herself by her gentle look. The woman was no longer young ; she must have been forty, and yet her face was still full of charm, and there was, above all, in her personality a something seductive, which is even more attractive to a man than a classical beauty.

I approached her slowly, and with every mark of a profound respect.

In reality, in the middle of my greatest follies, I have always had a fund of veneration and esteem for matters religious and things belonging to God.

The Lady Superior rose at my approach, and deigned to make two or three paces towards me. In monastic manners, this is a very great favour.

Touched by so delicate an attention, I prepared to address my sincere thanks to her, when all of a sudden, recoiling with a sort of fear, and appearing to yield to an unconquerable feeling of distrust, she fell back into her armchair, and buried her face in her hands.

I rushed towards her, in order to come to her assistance.

But what was I to do?

I know of no position in the world more uncomfortable for a man than to be near a woman whom he sees is really ill.

Either he does not move or he moves too much. Either he stands still astounded, or he jumps about uselessly.

That is exactly what happened to me. That is exactly what would happen to us men in a similar position.

I felt in my pockets for a smelling-bottle. . . . My pockets were absolutely empty. I had left my pouncet-box under the cushions of my carriage.

The poor woman seemed about to choke. I put my hand to her corset to unhook it . . . but sud-

denly I stopped . . . to touch her awakened scruples, and I seemed to hear in the air a voice which cried to me :

“ Take care, profane one, that corset is sacred, and such a sinner as you cannot touch it without crime ! *Vade retro Satanus !* ! ”

Seized with a religious terror, I relinquished the corset, at the risk of allowing the Lady Superior to stifle. . . . Morality before everything.

Perhaps I should not have reasoned in this way a few years before . . . but a man's mode of looking at things changes with his age, and to that he invariably fits his morals. Of what use would be human intelligence did it not lead to this ?

But while I am philosophising, or rather explaining, though they are much the same thing, the reader is kept waiting, my abbess is well-nigh breathless.

At last an idea seized me ! . . . It was neither original nor sublime, but it was none the less worth its weight in gold.

I perceived a bell-pull. I tugged at it violently. . . . It may be seen that I had not made a great effort of genius or imagination.

In an instant the room was full of nuns. They surrounded the Lady Superior, and I begged some explanation of the strange incident of which I had been the witness, and possibly the involuntary cause.

They assured me that I had nothing to reproach myself with, and that I could in no way be considered

as responsible for what had happened, for that the abbess of the convent of Sainte-Marguerite was subject to this sort of fit whenever she suffered any emotion, however slight it might be.

I assured them that I had not intended to cause her the least possible emotion, but the lay sister most kindly observed that I had no need of any excuse, because the holy lady often suffered from this sort of fainting-fit, which, besides, was caused by a delicate state of health which the physicians in the neighbourhood had been as yet unable to cure.

I did not ask for, nor did they give me, any further explanation.

The lay sister invited me to follow her into the room which had been allotted me.

I hastened to do as I was bid.

But before going I cast a last glance at the abbess; they had just removed the band which covered her forehead.

It was an extraordinary thing!

Her features seemed familiar to me.

But what probability could justify such illusion? What anterior relations could I have had with the abbess of this convent? It was very clear that I had been deceived by one of those resemblances which sometimes happen, and which are impossible to explain.

Evidently it was nothing but a simple fainting-fit. The lay sister herself had declared that her mistress

was subject to them. An emotion, a caprice, was perhaps the simple cause. I had had to do with a nervous woman, that was all.

Soon I thought nothing more of the matter, and I occupied myself with my quarters for the night.

There had been no stinginess as to the size of my room, nor as to the softness of my bed. I had, if it so pleased me, plenty of room to take exercise in before lying down, and the means of finding an excellent night's rest subsequently.

I took advantage of my big room to stretch my legs, for a day entirely passed in my carriage made me feel uncommonly stiff; my journey had wearied and excited me; I no longer wanted to sleep, sleep had been altogether banished.

Though I was tired, yet I felt particularly wakeful.

To go to bed in such a state of mind and body would have been a mistake. Repose, when too anxiously sought for, is never to be found. The man who wants to sleep cannot.

I made up my mind not to attempt to sleep, but resolved to wait till sleep came to me.

Till then I should have to fill up my time, or rather, to use the proverbial expression, kill it. It remained for me to find in my imagination the most agreeable means possible of getting to rest.

The ringing of a bell interrupted me in the middle of my hesitation.

How did the sound concern me? . . . What did it mean?

A simple reflection served as an answer to these two questions, which were perhaps a little indiscreet, for, in truth, what passed in the convent of Sainte-Marguerite did not concern me.

My reflection was this :

It was about nine o'clock. Nuns are not in the habit of turning day into night and night into day. . . . It is therefore the hour of bedtime . . . for the nuns as well as for me.

As a corollary to this reflection, there followed another, if possible, still more indiscreet. That is to say, I asked myself this impertinent question :

"Where the devil is the dormitory?"

Once upon the downward road, we know how very difficult it is to stop. Alas! I gave way to my old habits; I obeyed, without thinking evil, the early instincts of my life. . . . Without thinking evil! I beg the benevolent reader to well weigh these three little words, and to take them seriously. They really express my feelings; I say so seriously on looking back. My blood, cooler now than it once was, was only capable of a certain need of distraction and curiosity. The question was simply to find out whereabouts was that delightful dormitory. . . .

I drew back my curtains; I saw nothing in the opposite wing of the building.

I left my room, and found myself in an immense corridor, whose obscurity was feebly lighted by the indiscreet rays of the moon.

I saw a large window at the end of the corridor. I walked in that direction, trying to make as little noise as possible—that is to say, on the tips of my toes.

A gallery with ten windows, and thoroughly well-lighted, burst on my sight.

I was as a man who is dazzled ; but I rubbed my eyes and distinguished clearly a severe and gracious regiment of nuns, who, after having entered the dormitory in a body, proceeded towards the centre ; then each one went straight to her own bed.

The beds were as white as snow, and there was about a yard between them. The intention was, no doubt, to prevent these young ladies talking together, and too freely exchanging their sentiments, sentiments dangerous and frivolous perhaps, which the devil, who is so fond of hiding between two sheets, might put into their heads.

Let me be truthful. I was slightly disappointed ; the preparations of these young ladies did not last long. They could not be accused of trying to tempt me. Their prayers were probably over, for they had hardly touched their beds when the lights were put out. On account of their great modesty, they finished their nocturnal toilets in total darkness, The convent of Sainte-Marguerite-de-la-Croix was evidently a nursery of the too truly elect ones, whose places were marked out beforehand in Paradise.

I turned on my heel and walked gravely towards my room.

The corridor was a long one, and lighted at each extremity by an enormous window with a double row of panes, which served as a door of communication with a long stone cloister, which surrounded the building like a belt, and was ornamented at regular distances with scroll-work or escutcheons on which was carved the monogram of the holy patroness of the convent.

Walking with great precaution, I examined the strange figures sculptured on the balcony, which the strong moonlight caused to stand out ; but my walk and my vague reveries were interrupted by a strange apparition.

I said *apparition*, and I stick to the word.

It will be seen if I was justified in using it, and if there is any exaggeration in my language.

At about twenty paces from me, and just in the middle of the corridor, there arose a white, vaporous, intangible form.

The form moved !

It walked !

Age had not rendered me a coward ; but, yielding to the first movement of surprise, I thought it prudent to halt. Friend or enemy, angel or demon, human creature or immaterial product of a divine breath, I had to make up my mind and resolve what sort of a reception I should give to this mysterious visitor. I had often read stories of ghosts, and yet I had never imagined that it would have been permitted to me to

see the fantastic dreams of certain mad poets realised so exactly. Till then even I had laughed at ghosts. Was it that this want of faith, was it that this incredulous irreverence, were about to receive their just punishment? Was it that I was going to be forced to become a believer?

But while I was losing time in thinking it over, the apparition calmly advanced. The ghost, stopped by no scruple, went on with its business.

The small distance which separated us soon permitted me, if not to completely satisfy my curiosity, at least to have no doubt as to the nature of the being who approached me.

The being belonged to the human race, and, what is more, to that half of the human race which is said to be the loveliest and most lovable. It was a woman. It would have been besides very difficult for me to tell whether she were nice-looking or ugly. Her costume had betrayed her, and I had come to the conclusion from her general appearance.

Two words on her costume are perhaps necessary here. Her corsets, which were of a startling whiteness, encircled the figure of the unknown woman and sustained two globes whose firmness had victoriously resisted the influence of years. Not that this woman was very old, far from that. As she approached my room the rays of the lamp fell full upon her, and I could guess that she must be from eight-and-thirty to forty years of age.

And besides these simple corsets there was an irreproachable skirt, white as the driven snow, and a little pointed nightcap was coquettishly placed on flowing locks, which were still very abundant; and now you will have an idea of the dress in which my delightful visitor presented herself to my eyes.

I advanced towards her, thinking it my duty to speak first. In such a case, even with ghosts, one should always be polite.

"Madame," I stammered, not without some emotion, for I did not know to what to attribute the sufficiently strange position . . . "Madame . . ."

Here I stopped. That is a thing which happens most naturally when one does not know what to say.

Above all things I beg the reader not to suppose I had lost my head, it would be an error to think so. I had thousands of things to say, and I was well-inclined to be eloquent; but to thoroughly comprehend the sentiment, which froze the words upon my tongue, he must have seen what I then saw, and have been present at a sight which was of such a nature, he can well believe, as to thoroughly surprise and puzzle me.

The person whom I addressed did not appear to hear me.

Her face remained calm and insensible. She made not a gesture nor a sign which could lead me to suppose that she heard or meant to answer me; yet she went on still, as if she had been directed, in spite

of every obstacle, towards a predetermined goal. . . .
At last she arrived at my threshold.

I should have considered myself as the coarsest and worst-bred man in the world if I had not seized this most natural opportunity of worthily doing the honours of my apartment. . . .

I presented my hand to the amiable phantom, a thing which she did not seem to object to, and so led her in.

It offered no resistance, it made no difficulty !

I had no sofa. One could only offer what one has. I offered the edge of my bed. . . .

Ever the same submission, the same obedience.

But always the same silence, continuous, imperturbable and obstinate.

Forced to be silent because I was honoured by no answer to my remarks, I set myself to study more attentively the features of my phantom. . . .

I started back astounded. . . .

But be reassured. If I started back brusquely, it was with neither fear nor horror. For I chanced, on the contrary, to find this woman prettier than she had seemed to me as yet, and somehow to feel perfectly certain that I knew her. In the first place, I had no doubt for a moment that she was the Lady Superior who had fainted at the sight of me. Besides, I was at the same time persuaded that I had had relations with her in time past.

But in what place, under what circumstances, had

I seen her? Certainly she had never been anything more than a friend to me, for the remembrances which came back to me were tinged with calm, innocence, and chastity.

I ran over the different events of my life rapidly in my thoughts, and I tried to remember a name which I felt was on the tip of my tongue, but which I could not get as far as pronouncing. . . .

My efforts were at last crowned with success.

“Mademoiselle d'Oysanville!” cried I in my first transport of satisfaction; “Mademoiselle Thérèse d'Oysanville! That's it! That's it! I was certain I should remember it!”

My kind readers will perhaps have forgotten Mademoiselle d'Oysanville. . . . I was very nearly in the same position, and if she had not appeared to me in this strange dress, and under these extraordinary circumstances, it is probable that it is a name that was shrouded for him and for me in the sombre darkness of oblivion. The simple view of the person herself brought back to me the nature of the relations which had once bound us. In imagination, I saw once more the good-natured face of M. de Magnancourt, whom I had known at the château of Grand-Mesnil, belonging to M. de Lesdiguières, and who, after having conscientiously tried to make up a marriage between me and Mademoiselle d'Oysanville, had only succeeded by his skilful manœuvres in causing between us two, instead of a declaration of

love, a categorical and very frank explanation, after which we separated in a very friendly manner, never to meet again.

I do not know how it was, but that night, twenty years having passed since first we met, sitting within the four bare walls of my room, I felt a certain amount of regret that I had not married Mademoiselle d'Oysanville. It seemed to me that she must have been very unhappy or she would not have taken to religion, and that, had I been her husband, I should without doubt have succeeded in getting her to prefer the worldly life under more careless and philosophical conditions. Who can tell if there are, in the depths of these retreats which are called convents, dead hopes, smothered desires, and cruel disappointments! . . .

But this was neither the time nor the place to compose a treatise on philosophy. What was most pressing, was to occupy myself particularly with what was actually going on, and to penetrate the mystery which surrounded me.

I decided on a last attempt at conversation.

It is true she had not at first seemed to listen with much attention, which was not very complimentary to my self-love, but now I had to find out her reasons. It was I who had made the mistake. I had addressed her as *Madame*! But one does not say *Madame* to the Lady Superior of a convent, but rather *Mother*.

Her silence was perhaps but a lesson.

I began again with much unction :

"Mother . . . you cannot believe the regrets which I have felt for the emotion which my arrival must have caused you. Believe, that if I could have supposed . . ."

Here I stopped in my speech. I must confess, to my shame, that my discourse produced no effect whatever. The Lady Abbess simply looked at me from eyes which never moved. And yet, and I confess it at the risk of being thought a bit of a bragger, which is a shameful fault, particularly at a certain epoch of one's life, it seemed to me that I found in that look an indefinable sympathy and even an expression of tenderness.

I held the nun's hand ; her hand pressed mine.

Oh ! the reader may say what he likes, the vengeful thunderbolts of Heaven may fall on me, come what will ! . . . Laugh, if you like, at this lover, over whose head so many well-employed years have passed, because he awakens once more before addressing his last farewell to the sensations of youth ; let him find me ridiculous, let him be furious with me ; what does it matter to me ? this is a confession. . . . At all hazards the truth must be told.

I knew the Christian name of Mademoiselle d'Oysanville. I hoped at last to get her to listen to me by whispering it in her ear.

"Thérèse," said I, leaning towards her, "Thérèse, do not be hard on your old lover ; deign to hear and

answer him ; think but for a moment of the past, and follow him in the sweet excursion that he feels so well-disposed to undertake in your company towards happier times. Have you altogether forgotten the good Marquis de Roquelaure (for I was but a marquis then), the château of M. de Lesdiguières at Grand-Mesnil, the matrimonial manias of good old M. de Magnancourt, who never dined so well as when he had brought about a marriage? Does nothing remain to you, not even a slight, a fugitive remembrance of all those things ? "

Be just to me ; I fancy that I was patient, and that I took precautions. No one will accuse me of having wished to penetrate into that timid heart which was vowed to heaven, like a musketeer in a town taken by assault, in a buff jerkin and jack-boots. . . . I behaved, on the contrary, as must be seen, like a novice, courting the nymph of his earliest dreams, and imploring with a praiseworthy timidity the favour of a kiss.

Here words were not needed . . . I tried to snatch the kiss. I succeeded in doing so without meeting with the least resistance.

Sister Thérèse was, without doubt, on such good terms with Heaven as to be forgiven that kiss ; in the eyes of God, it was but the simple and affectionate kiss of a brother.

Need I say that I was very much encouraged by such a commencement . . . I know you will believe me.

I sat down in my saddle, and, making my rush as though I were charging in a tournament, I flew to battle, helmet on head and lance in rest.

Comparisons apart—for I had neither lance nor helmet—I engage in a struggle with the nun, in which I was certain to win if she did not defend herself better from my attacks than she had till now defended herself from my mute desires and eloquent looks. In short, save for a slight trembling, which I felt as I pressed her waist with my arm, there was nothing to make me suppose that she wished to resist my attacks. In reality, this victory humiliated me; it seemed too easy; and without the delightful memories that the sight of a woman whose name was mingled with the happiest echoes of my youth brought back to me, I ought perhaps to have declined to take advantage of the opportunities which the way in which she yielded herself gave me.

An angel could not have resisted such direct provocation!

You will remember that I had seated her upon the bed. Without seeming to know what she was doing, and yielding to the movement which I had initiated, she flung herself back, and I found myself quite close to her, breathing as it were her breath, and intoxicating myself with that fixed and penetrating look which she never ceased, I know not why, to fix on me.

There were five delicious minutes, minutes which

jealous Fortune doles out to us, minutes of which she seems so avaricious even when she is most generous. These five minutes so utterly absorbed me that I felt myself grow young again, and I was compelled to think this thought :

“Excellent M. de Magnancourt ! You, who were so anxious to unite us, why can you not see us now ? Your project is realised . . . ah ! it is true that one little formality is wanting—the wedding ! ”

But, bless me ! one cannot think of everything—besides, there was not time.

It will not, without doubt, be forgotten that till now the abbess of the convent of Sainte-Marguerite had never opened her lips.

Everything that had taken place had been done silently, with mystery, and without a single spoken word.

It was really something very incomprehensible. I had not troubled about it at first . . . but when my mind grew calmer, and allowed me to look at things coolly and dispassionately, I grew really frightened.

I was quite sure, it is true, that she was alive, and that I had not had to do with one of those shadows in human form who at times come back from the silent land, perhaps to avenge themselves upon some faithless lover, perhaps simply to puzzle an old friend. Those nervous claspings, those very human sighs, those perfectly significant hand-pressings, were witnesses to me that I had not been dreaming,

and that for the last hour I had been walking in the brilliant domains of reality.

And now that I had returned to a more tranquil state, I grew afraid of this strange dumbness, which the liveliest, the most tender caresses had not dispelled. I was frightened to see that for a second time perfect immobility had succeeded to her transports.

I was struck at a pallor which increased every moment. I saw from what I beheld the unequivocal signs of a fresh fainting-fit.

She commenced once more to breathe with difficulty. I thought that she would choke.

At all hazards I rushed to the window and flung it open wide.

A cool wind was blowing at the moment. The effect was instantaneous.

She passed her hand across her eyes, and with a slight scream she rose.

I flung myself at her feet.

"Where am I?" she said, looking round her in astonishment. "Why am I not in my own room? What has become of my vestments? Whither have I been brought? Who are you? Answer! Answer!"

She did not stop. It seemed that she was determined to make up for her long silence.

"You are in the room of an honourable man, who did not expect to have the honour of receiving Mademoiselle Thérèse d'Oysanville at such an hour as this."

"You have recognised me . . . call me not by that name . . . call me Sister Thérèse ! And I too recognise you . . . you are Monsieur de Roquelaure !"

"I am the man . . . the man who long ago was to have been your husband."

"Let us not talk of that," she cried with a blush. "I die with shame. . . . Oh ! if you knew . . . perhaps I have been seen. . . . Oh, I am a lost woman ! And you . . . you . . . what will you think of me ?"

"Why such thoughts, after having had such a happy idea ? If you have deigned, Sister Thérèse, to honour me with a visit, because you thought fit, because . . ."

She stopped me with a gesture and cried :

"It is because I am a sleepwalker !"

"A sleepwalker !"

"I shall die of the shame of it. Let me go. Farewell !"

"No ! you must *not* go ; we have things to say to each other."

"It is but just ; and it is for you to question me. Will you be honest ?"

"Why do you ask ?"

"Will you be honest ?"

"But . . . doubtless I will."

"How long have I been here ?"

"About an hour."

"Did I say nothing ?"

"You never even opened your mouth."

"I have not even been followed, watched perhaps by one of the nuns in the convent?"

"No, I can swear to that."

"And . . . what have I done here?"

I confess that at that question I was thoroughly upset. She asked me so simply, with such an innocent air, that I did not know what to think; either she was incredibly pure or wonderfully impudent. But, on looking into the eyes of Sister Thérèse, I was convinced that she was asking it simply, in all the sincerity of her heart, and that there was no double meaning in her words.

"What did you do?"

"Yes."

"Well . . . I don't know."

"What? You don't know! Were you asleep, then?"

"No! . . . No! . . . I was not asleep."

"Well, then?"

She did not give me time to think of an answer. She saw that she had been sitting on my bed; she sprang to her feet. A little mirror which hung over my fireplace suddenly revealed to her the particularly airy costume in which she had accorded me an involuntary interview.

Perhaps she thought at that moment of my old reputation as a man of pleasure, and of my antecedents, which, I confess, were not calculated to reassure her.

I do not know what other sign, which I neither can nor wish to remember here, carried conviction to her mind.

"You have taken advantage of my misfortune," said she, turning towards the door. "I curse you! . . ."

What terrible words, and what a fatal ending, after so joyous a beginning.

I could not remain under the weight of such a malediction ; it was impossible.

I rushed after the unhappy abbess ; I implored her to grant me one minute, and I obtained permission to explain.

On such an occasion, *to explain* is almost always synonymous with *to justify*.

I had some happy oratorical inspirations. I called up the pretty shadows of the past ; I praised to Sister Thérèse the charms of Mademoiselle d'Oysanville, and, ifegs, being helped by the devil, I was lucky enough to snatch a pardon.

This important affair having been settled, the good nun returned to her own quarters.

All had been for the best. No sound had troubled her retreat ; one was justified in hoping that not a soul in the convent could suspect the incomprehensible adventure which had taken place.

I had formally promised to leave at daybreak without attempting to repeat my farewells.

I kept my word.

They had got excellent horses for me, and my postillion only waited for my signal to crack his whip and start.

I came down from my charming nest at the moment when the wild birds were twittering their earliest notes. I flung myself into my carriage and told my man to get through the next six leagues without a stop.

The wheels went round; but a man rushed after us, begging us to stop, saying he had something to tell me.

I put my head out of the window.

The man was the villager who had conducted me the evening before to the convent of Sainte-Marguerite-de-la-Croix.

"What do you want, my friend?" said I.

"Oh! nothing, your grace, except to say good-bye to you."

"Very well, my good man, good-bye to you!"

"Doesn't your grace recognise me?"

"I? . . . not I! May the devil fly away with me if I do!"

"Your grace, I am your old *valet-de-chambre*."

"Eh? . . . what? . . . wait . . ."

"Your valet, Bruscambille!"

"Bruscambille!" said I, lowering my voice. "Ah! Well, but if I remember rightly . . . wasn't it you, rascal . . . who, once upon a time . . ."

"Yes, monsieur le duc, yes. . . . There was a

little legal unpleasantness, a shindy with the police-minister Daubray about some wretched pieces of gold. . . . Oh ! it was a mere nothing, pooh ! ”

“ It is none the less true . . . ”

“ That they sent me to the galleys, yes, monsieur le duc. But I came out.”

“ Ah ! so you came out ? ”

“ As you see ; and whatever may be said of me, I have many good qualities, among others a propensity to economy. During my misfortune I put by a little money, enough to purchase my bit of land here ; I grow my cabbages, and I live honestly, like everybody else. Yesterday your grace would not be able to believe the pleasure I felt in seeing you ; for, notwithstanding your severity, you are kind and just . . . so I permitted myself the pleasure of rendering you a little service . . . ”

“ A service ? ”

“ Yes, a service.”

“ By doing what, Monsieur Bruscombille ? ”

“ By sending you to sleep in a nunnery, duke.”

“ Hush ! . . . hush ! . . . ”

“ Oh, I knew you would be delighted . . . ”

“ Be silent, sir. . . . ”

“ And I'll wager you *did* enjoy yourself.”

There was only one way of silencing Bruscombille.

I threw him my purse, and I gave the order to start at a gallop. The postillion set off.

Bruscombille shouted his thanks after me, but his voice died away in the distance.

Travelling makes one think; as we tore along I thought of my night's adventure.

Shall I say it? I felt first, in going over what had happened, a sentiment of pride.

But my blindness did not last long.

I soon came back to reality, and looked at things in their true light.

I said to myself: A woman still lovable, still handsome, has really accorded to me that which, at every period of my life, has always seemed to me the most estimable treasure, the most precious . . .

That woman consented to all my desires . . .

That woman gave herself up to me! Honour to Roquelaure! He is yet appreciated . . .

He is yet worthy of his old successes.

But that was the bright side of the coin.

And how about the other side?

That woman slept. . . .

END OF THE SECRET MEMOIRS OF THE
DUC DE ROQUELAURE.

